

Kay's legs made a steady beat as he jogged on through the countryside, his breath hissed through the filter of the head enclosing mask he wore- an aid to help his lungs cope with the illness known as Scarlet's Rattle.

The mask allowed him to move enough to work out and exercise without doubling over in a coughing fit. The charr pushed on, making it to the top of the hill he'd planned to reach. He dropped to sit on a wide rock, catching a good view of Kryta from the position. He smiled, satisfied with how far he'd come from his lodgings. The cure to his condition was still being researched but it seemed this mask would perform well enough to hold him over until developments were made.

His eyes roved along the path he'd taken and his shoulders stiffened a little, he saw a clump of three travellers. They were minding their own business but he didn't exactly want to run into them if he could help it. People often asked about the mask or threw other less welcome questions his way. It would be easy enough to find another way to get back home, there were enough landmarks to find his way no matter which direction he took. He waited a few more minutes for his legs to be content to move again before pushing himself to a stand and heading for a nearby row of trees...

Without the beaten track underfoot his paws noticed the tickling grasses through the straps of his sandals far more. Kay moved to the darker patches of ground, where there was only exposed dirt or shorter mosses that didn't climb as high.

His mind thought about the ache in his legs, it was a good ache, a sign that he was adjusting. That aside, focusing on the pain might make the trek home more arduous. With a conscious effort he tried to clear his head and let his thoughts wander, piloting him on the way home. Several paces later he came to a raised bank and hopped off it, his foot squished into a clump of cold, wet mud, snapping him back to reality. "Uh... whoops." He mumbled to himself, some of the mud had splattered up his baggy pants, that'd be a pain to clean.

The splutting and squishing sounds of the thick mud persisted even when he tried to gently step. His fur already felt the stick of mud, taking his mind off his legwear. Still, he could only really press onward, the ledge would be annoying to have to scramble up and the mere thought of extra exercise at this point was exhausting by itself. Step after step he moved deeper into the woods and unfortunately it seemed, deeper into the mud. A solid tuft of ground caught him by surprise, foot slipping on it and sending him staggering to the side. He kept his balance, kicking up more of the messy ground as he did, yet his feet were now completely submerged.

His legs were aching from the jog before, making each hesitation cry out in his muscles and turning each step into an effort of will.

Sucking mud yielded suddenly when he'd pulled up, only to gurgle and bubble as it closed over the imprint of his toes and soles. His second foot was deeper, making him really

strain to pry it loose. He felt a shift, his sandal was moving, all the struggles must have loosened the straps. His foot pushed back to sit inside it but he felt a fur-tingling squelch at his heel as the empty space had already been filled by the viscous mud.

“Ghh, damnation.” He whispered, hand rising to the mask as he braced himself and steadied his breathing.

With a single sandal the charr pressed onwards, yet the squelching mud was greedy for the other sole, spreading to coat between it and Kay’s paw pads. The weight of the mud had sucked over the hem of his pants, wading shin deep within the mud, he didn’t even feel when his second shoe came off.

He turned to look yet wherever it was had already been fully covered up. The twin grooves his legs had carved in the ground creaked and groaned, falling back and gurgling behind him. His rear viewing was interrupted as the ground shifted, he breathed a sigh of relief as his shins were able to move more fluidly, the mud seeming to become thinner but then it dropped him down.

He fell slowly, the mud line rising over his knees, yet he couldn’t kick back away from it or swim in it. Each move of his legs found ground that refused to stay solid. Soft enough to let him sink but sticky and clinging enough that it didn’t ease up on him. Instead it trickled on and up his thighs as he was pulled deeper into the thick patch of doughy quicksand. He felt the chill wetness on his hand and quickly reacted, raising his arms out of its grip.

The shift in weight seemed to push him in faster and he looked around quickly for anything to hold onto. If there was anything close enough his field of view was too diminished by the mask’s visor to see it and after risking turning his waist once, he felt the ground pull even harder.

A few squelching noises accompanied bubbles of air that brushed against him, slowly being pressured and chased out of his pants. “Had to pick the hard way back home, huh.” He mumbled to himself, if his legs weren’t so damn tired he might have had a chance or have been free already.

He tried to shift his pose, leaning further forward. His hands stirred the surface of the mud, no longer worried about cleanliness. A quick sweep within arm’s length showed nothing of use, slowly, carefully he leaned forward, his arms pushing into the mud, measured and making sure that he never pushed further than he could raise them.

His body jerked as it slid another full inch, quickly pulling his arms up for surety. His finger bumped something, a thick and solid object. His hands investigated further, having to lean out to get a touch, the mud’s surface shifted, a quick surge of alertness tracing his spine as what looked like a snake stirred on the surface. Yet it was too rigid, not a snake at all, a fallen

branch of wood that lay just below the mud. The thick gooey mud around him slurped and gurgled with his motions as he calmed down.

“Hrm...” It wasn’t much, it wasn’t going to save or rescue him on its own, but the buoyancy could at least prevent him slipping deeper. Mud on his belly from the long stretch made him seem deeper than he was, yet he had still slipped an extra inch or two.

He struggled, kicking through the fatigue, trying to push through the mud, to scramble closer. His fingers touched the wood, unable to get a grasp. Another sudden slip made him lash with his arms, the muddy wood shifted but in the wrong direction! Away! His stomach twisted as his fingertips now couldn’t reach it. Slipped just far enough down that the angle was too far to reach the tree limbs' new position.

*Squish, splut* the bog around him creaked again. With a frustrated and irritated grunt, he wiggled his whole body, stepping, pushing, kicking. It was fruitless serving only to chase the last few bubbles and then the loud gurgle. With a pained sigh Kay realised that he was quite well and truly stuck. His ears flicked within the mask, trying to listen for any noises, fretting that he might need to call for aid if there was even anyone passing nearby. He’d tried to get far enough away from the path on purpose to *avoid* any passersby from even seeing him yet now he wondered if it was his only option.

“M-maybe if I...” just wait, was the rest of his thought. Just wait to recover energy. Still, the sky had already changed colour, before long it would be dark. His brow knotted, the couple he saw walking might be his best and only hope, yet, if they were travelling somewhere instead of taking a casual stroll then they wouldn’t be returning.

“Grrh... Damn it!” He hissed before his voice was overcome with coughing. The bog let out one last slurp, almost sounding like mockery as his fit shifted his weight around. There was one consolation, with that last sudden inch he had stopped sinking at last. That didn’t make him any less stuck, worse still he recalled that it hadn’t rained for over a week now, so if the mud here was like this it wouldn’t be drying up any time soon.

Kay at least had contacts who would notice his absence eventually, though the region still hadn’t fully sorted out its bandit problem either. Kay sighed, the chances he would be found were high enough to keep his mind away from even a hint of panic; he just hoped that whoever found him would pull him out without needing too much compensation.