

## Chapter 14 – “The Swamp Life”

As the days flickered by, Kai became quickly acclimated to life in the swamps. It all came easy to Kai as it was natural to his survivalist self, always having to adapt to different wild and harsh situations to survive.

During the days of swamp village life, Jeb and he worked the field every day.

It was tiring work, but mostly boring for the battle-spirited Kai, so he made sure to walk past the training yard on his way home in hopes of seeing some action to liven things up.

Although his life was now a tranquil one, it hadn't been what he came here for and he had brought it up with granny Eri before. But for now, he had to earn the trust of these people before he could embark on the path of cultivation.

But to Kai's pleasure, his tiring work wasn't for naught. And now, in the eyes of the natives, he's been promoted from a mysterious stranger to a hardworking man that usually kept to himself.

Though Kai definitely wasn't the social type, he knew that being his true self wouldn't promise well for his place here in the tribe.

So most of the time, the pleasantries and normalcy he displayed to others were not genuine. It was an essential skill he had acquired during his struggles to survive on the streets and the underground scene.

But that wasn't to say that Kai was incapable of showing real kindness and gratitude. For people like Grandma Eri and Jeb were the few exceptions that actually received Kai's true thanks.

Not only was Jeb a surprisingly astute and friendly guy, but he also hadn't the slightest shred of apprehension when talking with Kai, something that could not be said about the occasionally gazes of malice directed at him from the more unapproving of the villagers since having an outsider like him in their tribe seemed like a disgrace to them.

But then there was Grandma Eri, a truly kind elderly woman who housed, fed, and settled him a place in the tribe. Although Kai could be cold and uncaring to strangers, people who showed genuine kindness and goodwill towards him would receive in kind.

"Granny!" He called out, walking into the ramshackle house that was Grandma Eri's. "I'm back."

"There's tea on the counter," She promptly called back from the backroom. "Help yourself."

Placing his hoe against the wall, he went over to get some tea. But before Kai could pour himself a cup, the knocking on the front door stopped him in his tracks. Putting down the kettle, he walked over and opened the wooden door only to be face to face with his previous captor; Elyn.

"Ah," She droned, unamused. "It's you..."

"Wow, calm the enthusiasm," Kai said with an equally deadpan expression. "I'm also very happy you see you too... ~stare~"

Clearly, not one to fall for Kai's antics, she simply moved past him without sparing him another glance.

"Elder Eri, I've come for my herbal bath!" She called out, completely ignoring Kai who closed the door after her and went back to the tea kettle.

"Good - good," Grandma Eri said, coming out from the side room. "Did you bring the herbs?"

Curious as to why Elyn would need to come here for just an herbal bath, Kai listened intently to their conversation as he began pouring himself a cup of tea.

"Yes, I have them right here." She said, pulling forth a pouch strapped to her hip.

"Alright, then just put the herbs over there, and I'll be right back." Grandma Eri said, waddling back to the room she came from.

Standing there, now alone, both Kai and Elyn found themselves engulfed in awkward silence. Sipping on his tea, Kai was the first to break it. "So, an herbal bath? For what, stressed nerves?"

Giving him a blank stare, Elyn scoffed. "You don't know?"

"I really don't," Kai replied simply.

"It's to steadily improve my warrior's physique." She explained like he was an annoying fly.

"Your warrior's physique?" Kai muttered confusedly. "Wait, you're cultivating by taking a bath?"

She cast him an odd look.

"What do you mean by cultivating?" Elyn suddenly asked, now her turn to be confused.

Just staring at each other for a moment or two, Kai narrowed his eyes.

"Don't you cultivate to become stronger... like a cultivator?" He asked, carefully feeling out the waters at it would seem that he had information, that these people didn't.

"I don't know what a 'cultivator' is, but I'm a warrior." She said tersely. "I take herbal baths to improve my physique and move toward my next warrior stage."

Thinking over what she had just said, Kai paused.

"You're at **Skin Hardening**, right?" Kai tried, to gauge her reaction. However, only confusion found itself onto her face upon hearing the term.

"No... I'm a 1st-stage warrior..." She said suspiciously. "But... the hardening of the skin is the quality signifying a 1st-stage warrior."

Not saying anything, Kai went back to drinking his tea, clearly realizing that some of the information he possessed from **[Interface]** was something not known to the people of the tribe.

"Why did you think it was called **Skin Harde**-" She tried to ask warily but was cut off as Grandma Eri suddenly barged into the main room.

"I've gotten all the tools ready, and the tub has already been heated." She said, carrying a few ceramic bowls over to the table with the herb pouch on it. "You can just go over and get ready, I need just a minute."

Elyn walked over to the tub, pausing as she looked back at Kai suspiciously.

"Why are you so interested in warriors?" She asked suddenly. "I've seen you milling about the training yard the last few days."

"Oh, so you've noticed me?" Kai said amusingly, sipping his tea all the while.

"Yes, I've caught you peeping quite a few times." She said, trying to tease him into an awkward spot, however, she quickly came to realize that as a mistake as teasing was Kai's forté.

"Yeah, it's hard not to when there's such eye-candy," Kai said, smiling mischievously as he scanned Elyn up and down, the implication of his words clear.

And finally, that comment, with all Kai's previous efforts, he finally cracked through Elyn's placid defenses, causing her to blush just before she turned to hide it.

It had initially worried Kai that he couldn't crack the tough nut that was Elyn as she seemed to see through all his ploys to socially lower her guard.

Kai couldn't figure out why she was so on edge around him, something that incidentally also caused him a lot of unease towards her. But as proven now, she wasn't an impervious wall. However stout, she was still just a human girl.

Turning to leave with his newfound revelation, Kai left the two women to their devices.

Elyn quickly calmed down after he left, the blush tinging her cheeks fading. She just couldn't believe she had let that mysterious guy get under her skin, but as she about to internally curse the guy some more, she heard the snicker from Elder Eri as the old woman approached.

"He's a good boy," The old woman said fondly, "A mischievous one, but good."

Giving Elder Eri an odd look, Elyn asked. "Why did you take him in? - I wouldn't have trusted him."

"Why don't you?" The elderly woman asked, the glint in her eyes telling of her clearly knowing something that Elyn didn't.

Pausing to think, Elyn frowned.

"There's just something about him..." She said, skeptically. "Although by all means, he seems like a friendly guy, for some reason, my gut is screaming for me not to trust him. It's like whenever I speak with him, he's trying to throw me off-balance..."

"He is." Elder Eri simply said, beginning to unpack the bag of herbs, affirming Elyn's suspicions.

"Why though?" She asked incredulously.

Elder Eri sighed. "That boy has been through more than you can imagine,"

"Pfft - I doubt that," Elyn interjected mockingly, but seeing the look that Elder Eri gave her, she quickly shut up.

She knew very well that the capricious old woman was never one to lie or mislead others, meaning that her opinion of that Kai must have some merit.

"Because of the things he has experienced, survival has been ingrained into his very self." Elder Eri continued as she poured a liquid mixture into the bowl of herbs. "Whenever he steps into an unknown room, the first thing he does is looking for the nearest exit - in any conversation, he first and foremost looks for who you are and what your weaknesses are. Conscious or not, these actions are all part of what has allowed him to survive so far. It's his nature."

She walked over to Elyn with a bowl of ground herbs and handed it to her.

"Take him to the training yard and test him out, you might be surprised at what he's capable of." The elderly woman said. "Oh, and sweetie, just pour these in the tub for me."

Doing as Elder Eri said, Elyn gave her an odd, almost offended look. Although Elyn didn't know why the capricious elder had such a high opinion of the insufferable guy, she still doubted that he was truly like that as his joviality and carelessness didn't seem fake to her.

"Becoming a warrior isn't something that just anybody can or is allowed to," Elyn said, a bit too tersely for her own liking. "For the tribe to waste resources on somebody that isn't of this tribe and hasn't even been here for a whole week, I don't see that happening. Not also to mention that just because he's had a tough life, that doesn't mean that he's capable."

Not saying a word, the elderly woman walked over to Elyn and cupped her cheek.

"Child, advise you to not speak to your elders like that," She said, warningly. "Try him out, and if it is truly as you say, then you can come prancing back with that attitude and this senile old woman will tolerate it."

Realizing how disrespectful Elyn had just been to one of the tribe's highest authorities, she bowed deeply to the elderly woman in apology.

There she had gone again, her stupid temper once again getting the better of herself...

"I'm very sorry, Elder Eri." She apologized sincerely. "I will see if he's worth your words."

Nodding, Elder Eri smiled.

"Good, now get out of those clothes, unless you want to have your armor soak up all the herbs' potency." The elderly woman cackled.

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Walking out of the walled settlement of the Orak, Elyn made her way to the fields. But before she could go looking for her quarry, she spotted, sitting leisurely on the slope of a grassy patch of dirt, the exhausted figure of Jeb drinking from a waterskin.

It had been quite a while since she had talked with this happy-go-lucky guy. They had originally been good friends as children, but as their lives moved apart, Jeb becoming a farmer, and Elyn a warrior, they didn't get to talk as much anymore.

"Elyn!" Jeb called out happily seeing her approach. "Long time no see."

"It really has been a while." She replied with a smile as they clasped arms.

"What brings you out here, isn't training starting soon?"

"Yeah, but that's actually why I've come here, I heard you're supervising that Kai?"

"I am indeed, but what would you want with him?" Jeb asked confusedly before suddenly realizing. "Wait - you want him to try out for becoming a warrior?!"

"Elder Eri's recommendation," She said, the annoyed note of her voice not going unheard. "I have to see if he's any good."

A bit stunned, Jeb just stood there, staring dumbly at Elyn.

"So - where is he?" She asked, the awkward silence stretching on.

Shaking himself out of his stupor, Jeb sighed and pointed to a lone figure out in the fields plowing the soil. "That guy works like a beast, never gets tired."

Looking the way he pointed, Elyn was startled at what she saw.

Kai was topless, his toned and muscular body bare to see. However, it was not his impressive physique that caught her off-guard, but the innumerable scars marring his body.

With clothes on, it was clear to see that he had quite the accumulation of scars on his body, but hadn't really caught her notice before since who didn't have a few of those when living in the rough swamps?

However, now with his torso bare, Elyn couldn't fathom how a single person could end up like that and how he had acquired them all.

Catching herself in staring dumbly at the guy, the pride that allowed her to push herself further in training caused her to scowl and lose the small amount of pity she had just gotten for the guy.

*Sure he had scars - but didn't that mean he wasn't capable?! If anything, shouldn't it mean that he is lacking and wasn't strong enough to avoid getting the scars in the first place?* Elyn thought to herself. But even to herself, she knew that those consolation words were empty.

But that didn't mean she going to admit it.

"Kai!" Jeb shouted, waving him over and bringing Elyn out of her wandering thoughts.

As Kai approached, he picked up his shirt to dapple away some of the perspiration on his face suddenly smiling slyly as he saw Elyn standing beside Jeb.

She couldn't help herself from staring at those taut muscles and as much as Elyn hated to admit it, the scars on his body coupled with his perfect physique made him seem like just the kind of rough man that was right up her alley.

But then again, she wasn't going to fall head over heels for him seeing as she was still pretty pissed off by this guy's teasing and lackadaisical behavior.

"What's up Jeb?" He asked, smirking at how Elyn looked at him, the glint in her eyes telling him all he needed to know about what she thought of him. "It seems that you've caught yourself up with Elyn here, I hope she isn't too hard for you to handle."

Kai leaned in to inconspicuously whisper to Jeb, but spoke with a voice still very audible to all present. "She can be quite a handful, but don't hold it against her..."

Realizing what he was doing, Jeb smiled conspiratorily to match Kai's own devilish smile. Leaning in, Jeb whispered the same way Kai did; still just loud enough for Elyn to hear.

"I know - I know, but I think she was just born that way... Sigh - unfortunately, there's nothing we can do about it-"

"Enough!" Elyn finally shouted, having had enough of their theatrics.

"-Ahem... so, what was it you needed Kai for?" Jeb said, trying to play off their teasing as if it had never even happened.

Seeing that Elyn was going to pursue the matter, Kai interjected.

"Oh?" Kai claimed, "You came for me?"

"I mean," He continued. "I knew you were going to miss me, but so soon?"

Her annoyance reaching even greater heights, Elyn thought about just storming off. But remembering Elder Eri's words, she quickly calmed down and discarded that course of action.

No matter how insufferable these two guys were, she wasn't going to allow herself to fall into their insufferable teasing anymore.

"Jeb - back to work." She said commandingly, then turned to Kai. "You, follow me."

Without even uttering another word, she turned on her heels and began walking back to the settlement gate, leaving both guys stumped. The sudden change in the woman left them both at a loss for words but they just shrugged victoriously as they took it as their win.

"Elder Eri's orders," Elyn called out without turning back as she didn't hear Kai follow.

Snapping out of his musings, Kai dared not hesitate any longer after hearing that and ran up to her after giving Jeb a pat on the shoulder.