

Chapter 17 – “My Jackass in Shining Armor”

Walking through the gates of the settlement, Kai and others caught a lot of stares as their bloodied and battered bodies were on display. But more than that, it was the two bodies being dragged on a makeshift sled of fibers and bark that turned the atmosphere somber.

In the fight, Kai's group had lost two of the 1st-stage warrior rookies. The first that had died was the one who had taken an arrow to his throat in the initial attack, the other was the only woman of the group who later succumbed to her various wounds.

Seeing a host of figures rushing to meet Kai's group, they all stopped and waited for them to close the distance.

"Hedric! - what the hell happened?" The man in the lead of the approaching asked, and Kai recognized him as Alark's second-in-command, Wyn.

"Damned slavers - demonkin," Hedric spat. "A squad of them ambushed us."

"What? This close to the settlement?" Wyn muttered. "You sure you didn't walk outside the hunting perimeter?"

"Although we came within a close encounter with an early waker today and had to run, we didn't stray far from the settlement." He answered.

"They're getting cocky goddammit." Wyn cursed before his face twisted into a smirk. "Well, you guys seem to have really shown them their place - bwahaha."

"I have this one to thank for that." Hedric grinned as he clapped Kai on the shoulder proudly. "He's like a beast, I mean, even the demonkin were shaking in their boots as he charged them down one after the other."

Although the mood was slightly somber as two warriors had lost their lives, such was life in the swamps, and often common occurrence.

Giving Kai an appraising once-over, Wyn nodded in approval.

"Well done boy, it seems that all the rumors are just useless fussing, we might really have a good use for you here in our tribe."

"Thank you, sir," Kai said simply, feigning amenability.

Motioning Hedric to follow himself as he wished to be briefed further on this, Wyn turned to leave. Kai was also about to split, wanting to head back home and get some proper food, but he was stopped by Hedric pressing something onto his chest.

Looking down, Kai saw the worn-looking book and took it in his hands.

His heart suddenly started beating faster, turning over the book to read the words inscribed onto the leather binding.

[Warrior Forging]

Kai grinned like an idiot, generally joyous now, as he finally had the opportunity to do what he had been looking forward to ever since waking up in this strange world.

To cultivate!

"You've more than earned this kid," Hedric smiled. "Find Alark, he'll definitely sponsor you some herbs after what you've done today."

Clasping Hedric's arm in appreciation, Kai winced.

"Oh yeah - you go get a look at those wounds." He chuckled, giving a glance at the poorly bandaged wound of his shoulder.

"Stings like bitch, but was more than worth the look on the demonkin leader's face as he realized his fate." Kai grinned.

"That's the spirit haha!" Hedric guffawed.

Leaving the group, Kai went back to granny Eri's house, his aching bones and muscles screaming for a relaxing bath and to get the arrowheads still embedded in his shoulder out.

Hedric had originally offered to remove the arrowheads, but Kai had declined and left them in as would rather have the expertly granny take care of it. Honestly, it almost seemed as if that there apparently wasn't a wound the capricious grandma *couldn't* take care of.

A few hours later, Kai was all bandaged up and lounging by the medicine table with a cup of tea, replaying the fight back in his mind and enjoying every single second of it.

After coming back though, he hadn't been expecting the barrage of both reprimanding and praise from the capricious old grandma, ever as true to her nature.

She was furious that he had gotten himself hurt like that. But was conversely also overly proud of the fact that he had been instrumental to taking down a Lurker party.

Kai honestly couldn't figure out how to take it. But as he had become used the old woman's antics, Kai merely smiled and hugged her tight.

Doing this, he earned another slew of reprimands of how he was such a brute and that he should unhand her old self, but it was clear as day that the old granny was beaming at the affection he had shown even though her words seemed to tell otherwise.

Cracking open a lazy eye as he relaxed on the chair, he saw a hesitant-looking Elyn walk in the front door after a few knocks.

It was more than obvious that she was nervous and embarrassed, unconsciously fiddling her hands and touching her hair like some small school girl, even though Kai knew she was a cold-hearted warrior who wouldn't hesitate to kill.

The change was a pleasant sight for sore eyes, and Kai drunk it all in with a shit-eating grin.

"So, you've come to proclaim your love to me, the hero who saved you?" Kai asked, barely able to hold his face straight as he indulged in his second-favorite thing to do in this new world, which was only beat by eating Grandma Eri's divine Swamp Boar stew; teasing Elyn.

Her cheeks flared and her nervousness turned to annoyance with a dash of bashfulness.

Suddenly storming over to him, Kai barely had time to react before Elyn kissed him, deeply. She suddenly pulled away, all too early for his liking, she harrumphed.

"This is my thanks for saving me," She crossed her arms, giving him a stern glare. "And now don't go around expecting you'll get any more than that."

Although Kai teased Elyn at every corner, he had let her know on more than one occasion that he was interested in her with the occasional flirting. But even so, he hadn't been expecting her sudden forwardness, especially with that pride of hers that seemed to so often hold her back.

His action of saving her hadn't really been noble or heroic, seeing as he miscalculated his ability to get them both out of the arrow's path unharmed, but he definitely wasn't going to decline her gratitude.

Enjoying the sight of the blushing Elyn storming off, Kai admired her well-built figure from behind which a pleasant smile. Elyn was no beauty, only barely passing off as cute, but her exotic ethnicity, fit body, and feisty personality more than made up for it.

Kai sighed deeply, falling into memories of the past.

The clatter of cans hitting the concrete below made the kid rummaging through the trash wince, glancing around warily to see if anyone had heard him and would come to check.

This alley was the thirteen-year-old kid's primary source of food as it neighbored two restaurants, so the thrown-out food was not only bountiful but also relatively uncontested with the old homeless geezers that would wring him dry of anything he would find. The only problem was the restaurant owners that would always beat him up and chase him away when they find him digging through their garbage.

So when Kai heard the approaching footsteps from around the corner, Kai froze for a moment before scurrying down and rushing to hide. But before he could disappear from sight fully, the tingle of a young and pitchy voice sounded out.

"H-hello?" A little girl said, coming into sight.

She was barely older than Kai, fiddling her finger in pretty dress nervously. He had never seen her before, and he no idea why she was here as she was obviously no homeless kid.

But as she kept approaching, regardless of Kai not saying anything back, he began to feel more and more like a trapped animal being pushed into a corner.

Reaching his breaking point, Kai sprung forward with a soggy piece of cardboard he picked up in his hand, pointing it threateningly at the girl as if a dangerous weapon.

"Stay away!" He yelled, trying to seem as imposing as he could.

She at first seemed shocked, or rather surprised at Kai's sudden outburst, but as she saw the feeble drooping piece of cardboard in his hands, she began giggling girlishly.

Realizing his situation, Kai's stance softened, some of the tension leaving his body. He hadn't had any real human contact in a while, the only interactions being either running from or being beaten up by.

"Do you want to play?" She suddenly asked once Kai had considerably calmed down. "I've watched you going in here for a few days now... you seem lonely..."

Kai was completely taken aback by the oddness of the situation and merely stared dumbly at the girl.

Ever since then, the girl, Aria, would come back each day to this very alley, each time hoping Kai would show up.

At first, Kai would only come back there again every few days, unsure what this Aria truly wanted with him. But as time went on, and Kai got progressively more open to the high-spirited and clumsy girl, he began coming each day, to the point where he would come early and avidly await her every single time.

Neither of them really talked about their lives, nor where they came from, they simply played like only children could, something Kai hadn't really ever done before now.

Aria was his friend, his first true friend.

"Kaaiiii~" Aria cooed from a perch, sitting atop a small fruit crate.

Kai looked up from the ground, his hands stained with the color of the chalk he had been using to draw on the ground, something Aria had brought for him to play with the day before.

"Uh... yeah?" He replied, slightly apprehensive at the tone Aria was using as it was the one she only used when she was up to no good.

"Come here," She extended her little dainty hands with fingers splayed in a grabbing motion.

Now ever as cautious, Kai hesitantly started moving, ever so slowly. But seeing his wariness, Aria harrumphed annoyedly, jumping off the crate.

Before he had time to react, Aria had closed the distance, landing a quick peck on his cheek.

"I have to go home early today, papa's been upset lately," She explained, turning to leave. "I'll see you tomorrow!"

She left the furiously blushing Kai to stand frozen, the chalk in his hand already long forgotten as it dropped to the ground in favor of holding his hand to his cheek where he swore he could still feel her warm lips.

As Kai went back to his sleeping shelter in the abandoned shipping container at a nearby warehouse, it was not until long into the night that he finally fell asleep, unable to forget it what had just happened before she left him there in the alley.

But when Kai woke up, he realized he had seriously overslept as the sun was already beginning its descend from the midday zenith. Rushing back to the alley in a sprint, as Aria should already have been waiting for a while, Kai panted, hands on his knees in an attempt to get his breath back.

"A-ah-Aria! Sorry -phew- to make you wait for so-ah long," He called out, worried that she'd be angry as she usually was when he overslept.

But as he waited a moment, catching his breath, no response came back from the dark alley.

Frowning, Kai walked in deeper, confused as to why there was no pitchy girl voice eagerly calling back at him. Aria should definitely have been waiting here as she was quite punctual, and even during the times Kai had been late, she would still be waiting.

He couldn't put his finger on it, but something in his gut told him that something was... *wrong* - *very wrong*.

Kai passed the scribbles he had drawn on the dirty concrete yesterday, but as he approached the end of the alley, there was still no sight of Aria - until...

A leg... pale and petite... sticking out from behind a dumpster.

Fumbling, Kai could barely get his legs to move, but when he crested the corner, he was met with the sight of Aria, battered and bruised, neck twisted at an unnatural angle, and her eyes staring listlessly into the aether.

Kai knew that lifeless stare all too well...

The sight... cut into his mind...

Scarring itself...

Forever...

"So the hero returns only to woo the women, you're really beginning to make the rounds nowadays." A wisened voice cackled. "I'm beginning to wonder if it really was wise for me to take this playboy into my household - it's going to ruin my name!"

Granny Eri's words broke through Kai's wandering dark thoughts, jolting him from his daydreaming.

Kai chuckled at the antics of this old grandmother, happy to be rid of his past demons.

"Granny Eri - oh, I could never! To dirty your prestigious name would be against everything I stood for." Kai exclaimed dramatically, indulging her teasing.

"Bah - don't worry about this old woman's ramblings," She sighed, walking over to the mixing counter at the far side of the room. "I remember the youth, good times those were. Don't go wasting it now because of the dubious words of this old hag."

"Old hag? What do you mean granny? You could pass off as my sister." He grinned innocently.

"Sister my ass, I'll whack you with my mixing spoon if you don't shut that smooth-lipped hatch of yours - you brat!" She cackled, clearly enjoying the banter.