

Chapter 12 - "Kindness"

"I said take off your clothes, you stupid boy." She admonished. "How else are you supposed to get washed up; you reek something foul."

"Ah..." Was the only thing Kai could get out, a bit embarrassed at where his mind had wandered for a brief moment.

"Besides, we also need you to get out of those dreaded Lurker clothes." She said disgustedly. "Else, you're probably going to be stoned down in the streets if you keep walking through them with those on."

"Yeah... that doesn't seem all that preferable," Kai replied awkwardly.

"So get out of them clothes boy."

"Right here?" He said, with a bit of apprehension.

"The bath is right over there," She said, pointing to the corner of the room. "It's usually used for herbal baths, but you look one for the weary and could definitely use some time to relax,"

She spoke with a surprising note of kindness and... was that pity?

"Besides, you don't have anything nothing this old hag hasn't seen before." She cackled, bringing Kai out of his thoughts.

Shrugging, Kai began unclothing. It wasn't like he really cared for being nude in front of others, such shame had long been lost to him. He had originally just wanted to keep some modicum of decency as she had been gracious enough to take him in and tend to his wounds, but if Grandma Eri said so, he wasn't going to hesitate.

As he walked over to the large wooden tub placed in the corner of the room, he untied and removed his scale-leather shirt and vest, leaving his muscular and well-toned torso bare.

But before he even managed to begin removing his pants, the clatter of something being shattered sounded out behind him. Turning around, he saw Grandma Eri with her back to him, in the process of picking up broken pieces of ceramic.

"Ah! Let me help you with that Grandma Eri," Kai said hastily, approaching her crouched form, afraid that she might hurt herself.

"No need-" The old woman replied, not turning around to face him. "I've got this, just get your clothes off and let this clumsy old granny clean up."

Stopping in his tracks, Kai just gave the crouched figure of Grandma Eri an odd look before going back to unclothing. What had escaped Kai's notice though, was the stray tear running down Grandma Eri's cheek as she picked up the shattered bowl.

After having seen Kai's mutilated and scarred back, her grandmotherly heart croaked in pain and she dropped the bowl of tea herbs she was going to brew. The old woman originally

wanted to take Kai in because she saw some of the pain and torment that he had gone through in those blue eyes of his.

However, she could've never thought in her wildest dreams the true extent of this boy's abuse. It was clear as day to Grandma Eri, the healer and herbal concocter of the tribe, that those scars marring his body weren't just from fighting.

She had severely underestimated this boy.

What he had gone through... was something that even her little battle-scarred Urok couldn't begin to imagine.

How does he seem like an ordinary young man? How is he still sane? -How is he even still alive? Grandma Eri couldn't help but wonder with horror, aghast at the prospects.

But unheeded to Grandma Eri's thoughts, Kai jumped into the tub of water, surprised to find it not cold at all, but just at about room temperature. There was also an odd aroma coming from the water, but he didn't mind as it was rather soothing to his frayed nerves after having spent multiple days in the wild and inhospitable swamps.

As Kai was relishing in the calming experience, he began slowly drifting off.

"Mommy!" A young childish voice called out. "Mooooommy~!"

As the door to the bathroom suddenly smashed upon, a decrepit-looking woman stepped in; a lit cigarette in her mouth.

"What!" She yelled, clearly pissed off as her pockmarked face twisted in a frown.

"I-I..." The young child stuttered, clearly realizing that he had just made mommy angry.

"Stop stuttering you retard!" The woman shouted. "What is it?!"

Completely frightened, the child forgot what he had originally called his mother here for. Looking down, he realized streaks of gold passing through the water of the bathtub.

"I-I.... I think I peed." He said, slightly panicked.

However, instead of the woman turning even angrier, the frown on her face disappeared, replaced with a flat mask completely devoid of emotion; utterly unreadable to the fearful child. Seeing this, the child already knew he had fucked up big time.

That expression... never promised well.

As his mother approached, he felt his body tremble involuntarily, daring not to look into her dead eyes. Sitting herself gently on the edge of the tub, she stretched out a hand to gently caress his back, almost as if she was consoling the terrified child.

However, the moment he overcame his fear and looked into the emotionless eyes of his mother, he felt her hand suddenly clench the back of his hair - roughly.

He barely managed a scream before his head was plunged under the water. Although the hand holding him under the water was feeble and weak, he was still only a mere child, wholly unable to resist.

Water splashed over the tub as he flailed and choked on water, but the hand did not let up.

The cigarette falling into the tub, it was put out as the ash spread out in the roiling water of the flailing child.

It was not long before his struggle slowly began dying down, his small lungs failing to keep him lucid, on the edge of blacking out. It was only when his limbs began going limp and all resistance stopped that he was suddenly pulled out of the tub and thrown harshly onto the cold and hard bathroom tiling.

Coughing out mouthfuls of water, he lay limp on the cold floor, barely able to see through his blurry vision the figure of his mother lighting another cigarette with a lighter.

Kai was suddenly brought out of his memories as Grandma Eri placed a kettle and a bundle of clothes by the tub's side.

"Once you're done, you can have some tea, and these are some clothes that wouldn't elicit the wrath of the tribe." She said gently.

"Thank you, granny," Kai replied, generously with a chuckle. But as she was about to leave, Kai just thought of something.

"Grandma Eri - if you don't mind me asking, what is the relationship between you and the chief?"

Turning around, she gave another gentle smile.

"Ah, a good boy that one." She said nostalgically. "He and his sister were once just small children of the tribe, wholly alone, orphaned by the slave-traders terrorizing our people. But through a series of circumstances, I saw something in those kids and ended up taking them in, raising them as if they were my own grandchildren."

"Huh... now it makes sense why he showed so much respect for you," Kai said.

"Pff - he's loyal to a fault, like a puppy," She said, seemingly very amused about some old memory. "Show him that you're worth something to the tribe; show him that you're a man, and you'll have earned his respect and a place here."

Listening and taking her advice in, Kai said as he nodded gratefully.

"I'll remember that; thanks, granny."