

Chapter 18 – “The Third Boon”

Knock, Knock

"Alark? It's Kai." He called out, in front of the warrior's large hut.

A silent moment passed.

"Come in." A gruff voice responded from inside.

Walking in without further ado, Kai looked around at the hand-made furniture decked in fascinating carvings and pelts of various beasts.

"So, barely two moons, and you've already made yourself stand out amongst the warriors - besides you being an outsider that is," Alark stated, taking in Kai's figure as he scanned him with an observing gaze all the while.

"I wasn't lying when I said to battle was my nature." Kai grinned challengingly back, letting his true nature peak out of his facade for a slight moment.

"Bwa! You sure did." Alark scoffed merrily.

"So - boy, I suppose you've come for your reward," He stated. "Hedric informed me of everything and gave the go-ahead for your induction as a warrior."

Moving forward, Kai pulled out the [**Warrior Forging**] book from a satchel and was about to give it over but Alark's raised hand stopped him.

"You can keep this one," He explained. "We have many of them that we've collected over the years."

Pausing for a moment, Kai's brows scrunched together with slight confusion.

"I see... but why do you keep then normally keep the books under lock and key?" Kai asked, having wondered over this very fact since he had been denied before of just even being allowed to take a glance at one such book. "I mean, wouldn't it be best that everybody could become a warrior, or at least move somewhat along the path?"

Shaking his head, Alark just sighed.

"No, but I wished it was that simple." He said. "Raising a warrior isn't simple, and it's a very resource-intensive process. So we can't have everybody in the tribe running around snagging up herbs for themselves, making it so that no one even manages to achieve the 1st-stage. That's why we keep the information of [**Warrior Forging**] manuals only in the hands of the capable."

Nodding, it made sense for Kai as he had also been thinking that the situation must've been somewhat along those lines.

"Well, kid. I suppose I'll need to get you started don't I," He grunted, bowing down to fish out something behind the desk. "I mean, you did earn more than just the privilege of information after what you did."

Pulling himself back up with a hand on the desk, Alark revealed a small brown sack, slightly bigger than a closed fist. Catching the cloth sack as it was thrown to him, Kai was immediately hit with the potent stench of herbs. Not expecting the smell, his senses were bewildered for a moment.

It was only after sneezing the discomfort out that Kai grinned and gave an overly exaggerated bow.

"Thanks, boss."

"Bwa! Get out of here kid, I have work to do." Alark grunted at Kai's antics.

Sitting in his bed, Kai was shirtless with the **[Warrior Forging]** manual in his lap. Kai merely stared intently at the book, not entirely sure what choice to make.

He had previously taken a sneak peek into the book's contents, however, he hadn't been expecting the sudden **[Interface]** prompt that appeared the moment he opened it.

It asked if he wanted to absorb the manual's information, which was the first time that had even happened. Kai remembered specifically that his **[Interface]** trait had the ability to absorb information from various mediums, but he had yet to find anything here in the tribe he could use the ability on.

He even tried with some of granny Eri's medicine books, but he still couldn't get the ability to activate and he was starting to wonder if he was doing everything wrong. But It was first when he got his hands on this manual that something finally happened.

Although he would love to try out the ability and see what would happen, the prompt gave Kai pause.

-Information Accuracy 17%-

WARNING: Information accuracy is extremely low - high amounts of incorrect and missing information. Wrong and inaccurate information will be marked as such upon absorption.

Do you wish to absorb **[Warrior Forging]** - An Incomplete Body Transformation Manual?

[Yes/No]

It was now more clear than ever that Kai knew certain things these natives didn't. Through the access of his **[Interface]** and the brief interaction between him and the cosmic being that brought him here, he had obtained certain pieces of tidbits that he could use to further himself beyond his peers.

One of these things were for example that these 'warriors' of theirs were actually cultivators of something called **[Body Transformation]**. Another thing of note was that the book listed only four possible stages, each getting vaguer and vaguer of how you'd might obtain it and that was essentially there it ended in the manual.

But clearly, through the **[Interface]** there had to be six stages in total, considering that there were augments for; **Skin, Bone, Muscle, Flesh, Viscera, and Mind.**

So the equivalent stages had to be something like this; **Skin Hardening, Bone Refinement, Muscle Strengthening, Flesh Transforming** or maybe **Transformation**, and two subsequent stages for the **Viscera** and the **Mind**, however, that was as far as Kai's knowledge and the book's incomplete information took him.

Sighing, Kai focused his gaze on the book in his lab as he leaned against the wall of his room.

While it definitely didn't seem detrimental from how the prompt worded everything, he was still wary of jumping headfirst into unknown waters. But since all the wrong information in the book would be marked false, it could only be beneficial in the long run, he reasoned.

As such, Kai took a deep breath and accepted the dubious prompt.

[Warrior Forging] - An Incomplete Body Transformation Manual has been absorbed by [Esoteric Absorption]!

The sudden intrusion of information bulldozing into his head wasn't painful but rather unnerving as hell, and he had to grip tight to his knees so that he didn't fall over in bed from the vertigo.

It only lasted a few seconds though, and suddenly - he knew.

It was an incredibly odd feeling as the information in his head was distinctly different from anything else in his brain. It was like it had been stored completely different from how his brain usually did with information and such.

It wasn't like memories that had to be recalled or his many neurons that had to communicate with each other to bring the information to light. It simply just was... there.

The experience was surreal, dizzying, and wholly astonishing, being able of knowing an entire book's contents in any instance and time. But Kai quickly calmed down from the exaltation, combing through the wrong and inaccurate information of the book's information he had just absorbed, now trying to figure out a different plan of action than of what he had previously taught to be the correct way of starting on the path of cultivation.

"Gah!"

But before Kai really even started to think things over, the sudden appearance of a new screen startled him.

These random pop-ups were really getting to his nerves, as he wasn't someone to be easily snuck-up on...

[You have decided to walk down the path of cultivation - **Third Boon**]

~Six augment slots, eighteen choices~

-Choose one-

"Choose one? Choose wh-" Kai's muttering was suddenly cut off as right before his very eyes, the air shuddered like a shimmering haze as three different glowing glyph-like symbols carved themselves into existence.

[Augment - Skin]

-Morning never comes upon the flicker of a dying star-

[Augment - Skin]

-To be impervious, undaunted, and yielding, means to oppose all those who stand in your path, be them gods or the heavens themselves-

[Augment - Skin]

-To reap is to gain power; eat the spiritual and transcend your mortal coil-

"Oh-kay....." Kai chuckled nervously, as he stared at the intricate glyphs floating in the air and the rush of information that accompanied them.

He really hadn't been expecting something like this at all.

"So this is this third boon that dubious woman gave me huh?" Kai trailed off, attempting to see if he could glean more of the floating glyph's physical appearance other than the text presented to him.

However, he couldn't make heads or tails of the immaculately intricate designs at all, so he quickly dropped it. Doing another once-over of the three different 'options', Kai sighed expansively.

"Seriously, what is it with all this vague and mystic wording?" Kai scowled into the air as if to reprimand the being who had dropped him off here. "At least you could've given me a god's damned handbook..."

"Anyways..." He sighed once again. "As described in my **[Interface]**, augments are supposedly things that will help me direct and steer my cultivation in a certain direction."

"But the question is; *how?*" He added, scratching his chin.

The flavor text although vague, must have some meaning or other, so Kai couldn't choose blindly here.

As such, he spent more than a whole hour merely going back and forth, reading the same three lines of text over and over again. It was during this time, Kai realized there was more to the text than merely what could be seen. Internally, an unfamiliar sensation from a place unknown, he could vaguely get a sense of each choice.

The only reason he could attribute for this being his seemingly new ability to interact and sense the spiritual which had gotten from fusing with that **[Spirit Body]** he got from the translucent blue woman.

Stopping himself before diving deeper into that rabbit hole, he went back to the glyphs still patiently waiting in the air as they gave his room a slight gleam from their glowing luster.

The first glyph gave him a sense of, oddly enough; justice. However, to him, that notion also seemed... restrained, limited. Short-sighted.

He moved onto the next one. This one, in particular, called out to him, but not as if he himself resonated with it - rather as if there was a sensation of the glyph personally calling out to him. It was almost like it was attempting to cajole him to pick it.

Conflicted, this almost seemed contradictory to what the flavor text itself was saying - as if this was something bigger than himself and it wished for submit to it.

Growing apprehensive, Kai withdrew his attention of the sensation away like a viper, as if he had been literally burnt by it.

Scowling, Kai knew deep within himself that this was simply not the one for him so he promptly moved on. But this last one was clearly the most tricky out of the three as it was the only one not calling out to him. It seemed impassive, uncaring - uninterested.

This greatly intrigued Kai though as he felt neither deceit nor lured in comparison to the other two.

Kai didn't feel like hesitating anymore, and with the mere thought of his mind, the other two glyphs winked out of existence. But in the instant, before the two others disappeared, Kai felt an almost imperceptible hint of indignation.

He glanced at the glyph, not really knowing what was going on behind the scenes, however, the now alone glyph floating lazily in the air was still as impassive as ever.

He stretched out his hand and Kai felt no apprehension nor any fear as he touched the floating glyph. But instead of feeling anything solid that he had been unconsciously expecting, the glowing glyph of intricate design dispersed into moats of black energy that streamed into his body unceasingly.

Kai couldn't feel anything from the energy itself as it seemingly invaded his body, but Kai hadn't time to think before the entire world changed within the blink of an eye.

Still sitting, Kai looked wide-eyed at his surroundings. No longer was he on his bed, and nor was he in his room. Instead, all around him, were the screams of dying men and explosions that rocked the world.

Shooting to his feet from the muddied ground, Kai noticed that the book which been laying on his lap was nowhere to be seen. Ignoring this though, Kai had other matters to tend to at the moment.

Such as the robed man with long flowing hair and a glowing sword of bright white energy that was menacingly approaching him...

Readying himself for the worst, Kai's eyes turned into pinpricks as his usual eerie battle-calm took over his mind and made him turn to dash away from the man who looked like he wanted to cut a piece out of him. But before Kai even got one foot off the ground, the man in the robes all of a sudden flashed forward with inhuman speed.

Barrelling towards him, Kai felt his heart clench in the instant that the man in robes merely phased through his body rather than striking him. Kai whirled on his feet, only to see the man completely unhindered by the fact that he had just run through Kai. He merely charged onwards to meet blades with what looked like another robed man, though this one in ostentatious robes of purple and golds.

Kai paused. Looking down, he attempted to kick a loose rock on the bloodied and torn ground, however, to Kai's amazement, his foot simply phased through it. Exactly like the man in robes had done to his body.

"Is this a dream or... a vision of sorts?" Kai muttered to himself, now realizing the heated battles all around him of both robed and armored warriors who made the air shudder with massive magical explosions and tore the earth apart with colossal blades of energy.

However, even amongst the many thousands of people, they didn't even spare the young peasant-looking man who was Kai staring stupefied at everything occurring around him. Wholly out of place.

Resigning himself to... whatever this was, Kai inspected the scenes vividly depicting inhuman strength, speeds, and magical powers with wrapped attention. For each second that went by, Kai started to realize he craved this level of power more and more.

For every world-trembling ability, for every legendary warrior being snuffed out like a candle. It all only sought to further incite the hunger lurking deep inside him.

But everything came to a sudden halt as something encompassed the massive battlefield that even chilled Kai's incorporeal state to his very bones. Every single fighter stopped whatever they were doing, even those who had been on the verge of landing the killing blow on their enemy.

Everything was deathly still.

The only thing that could be seen moving in the utterly still battlefield, was a figure walking between the masses of dead bodies and terrifying-looking warriors frozen mid-fight. And the

only sounds that broke through the suffocating silence was the plip-plop of the man's bare feet displacing the muddied ground soaked with blood and viscera.

It was almost like he was the only moving piece in a painting, causing the surreal nature of it all to seem even more mystical.

Kai inspected the man closer, curiosity winning over apprehension, and realized that he was completely nude. The man was wholly uncaring of his lack of clothes as he strolled leisurely through the carnage as if he was merely going on a walk.

His face wasn't really anything to speak home of, and surprisingly enough, neither was his body which contrasted heavily to all the immaculately sculpted bodies of all the other frozen cultivators.

However, it wasn't his odd appearance that really caught Kai's attention, but rather the intricate tattoos lining his entire body like a transfixing tapestry. The tattoos oddly enough reminded Kai kind of the pattern that he saw in the **[Spirit Body]** he was given by the cosmic being, although this was altered and seemingly much more complex in nature.

Kai didn't doubt for a second that the tattoos and the **[Spirit Body]**'s meridians and pathways had some kind of connection, so he tried to burn the sight into his mind. But the more he looked at the mesmerizing tattoos, the more uncertain he became at being able to remember them as he could swear that they moved ever so slightly, and for some reason, he couldn't make them out properly.

Kai didn't get to keep doing this as the next change in the scene before he completely made him lose focus. The man didn't halt his gait at all, and neither did he do any action out of the ordinary, but his tattoos suddenly began becoming darker and darker, until they looked like openings to the abyss which had been drawn by pure void.

It was as if they were the gates to a black hole...

Kai didn't know it yet, but he'd been awfully close in that assumption.

All around, the hazes of energy and transparent figures started rising from the carnage and dismembered bodies, distorting as they were all sucked towards the ever-consuming void of the tattoos, greedily eating up both their remnant energy - and the souls of the deceased themselves.

The cultivators still frozen in their tracks looked ever as pitiful as they could only stare in horror at the scene, wallowing in despair as they failed to command their bodies against the unseen force locking them all down. And this was whilst a seemingly inconspicuous man was going around, committing atrocities such as consuming souls, not even allowing them the opportunity of entire samsara.

However, their terror didn't last long as their minds were suddenly only flooded with one single emotion as the all-consuming tattoos turned their attention to the still living all around, the souls of the dead not being nearly enough to satisfy their hunger for the spiritual.

The one emotion that claimed their minds was pure and utter agony.

Kai could only watch the scene with wrapped attention, both horrified at the sight of people literally having their souls wrenched from their bodies to be devoured and awed by the sheer display of utter domination and power that this man was causing.

As the vision abruptly winked out, Kai finding himself back in his room, sitting in his bed with the [**Warrior Forging**] manual in his lap, he barely stifled a scream as hot searing pain started shooting up his legs, traveling higher and higher.

It was as if red-hot snakes slithered up his skin, the pain only intensifying with each passing second as they crawled ever higher.

Finding the cloth of his bedding, he bit down with ferocity as he screamed into it, writhing in agony all the while. If not for the fact that Grandma Eri was not home, out tending to some matter regarding the chief, Kai would've been in serious trouble if he had to explain his current predicament.

But with Kai being no stranger to agony, he endured this pain. Possibly even being the worst pain of his entire life.

Luckily, the torment lasted only ten more minutes, although it felt like an eternity for someone who couldn't even form a single coherent thought, but Kai endured.

The only thing he managed to see before blacking out from the strain, were the exact same abyss-black tattoos he had seen on that terrifying man.