

Chapter 24 – “A Voice In The Dark”

Pain.

Kai... felt... pain...

In the eternal darkness of his mind, Kai could still feel the agonizing pain of his mauled body. He felt conscious, however, why wasn't he waking then?

Had he become paralyzed as he wasn't even able to rouse his eyelids?

Or... was this death?

Thought fluttered through his mind until...

"You aren't dead you dumb brat." A wretched and raspy voice cackled out of nowhere, startling Kai.

In shock, Kai tried to find the direction that the voice came from, but then again, he lacked any motory function to turn his head or any ability to see what was in front of him. The only two things he could do were listen and feel.

An attempt to speak also failed spectacularly, not producing any sound. At this point, Kai desperately wanted to sigh in exasperation, but that ability too had been robbed of him.

"Kid, your stupidity is palpable, think your words," The scratchy voice derided with clear annoyance. "You're in your mind - not your body."

Doing as the voice said, Kai attempted to broadcast his thoughts.

"Is there really a difference between the two?" Kai simply asked, finding it surprisingly easy to talk like this.

A long silence ensued, Kai wondering if the voice had actually left.

"I... suppose there really isn't..." The before arrogant voice finally said, now sounding surprisingly abashed.

Shrugging, or at least, mentally, Kai tried once more to see if he could spot the voice as he felt it was somehow nearby.

"Would you stop trying to look around, urgh - wait," The voice groaned. "Let me fix that..."

With the sound of a finger snap, Kai suddenly found himself laying on a pitch-black ground that merged into the darkness all around him, causing an odd sense of vertigo as it was at times hard to figure out what was up and what was down.

Finally having a body again, and one that wasn't utterly mangled, Kai got to his feet, looking around with curiosity as it seemed there was light in the endless darkness where he stood, but no light source. The pain was also gone, much to Kai's delight.

"Now, would you stop dallying around, I don't have much time."

"Fine, who are you?" Kai asked, peering into the darkness in search of the voice. "You've still yet to show yourself."

"Who I am matters not to you, you're dying and you need my help to save your pitiful little mortal life." The voice stated curtly.

"I guessed so, but to me, it sounds like that you need my help too," Kai interjected said, stunning the voice into silence.

"W-why would you think that brat?!" The voice screeched, its composure slipping easier than a beer-belly dad on a slippery slide. "I grace you with my offer of help, and a mortal like you dares to talk back?!"

"Well since you're currently an unwelcome guest inside my mind and seemingly have some urgency to save my life, it's a rather easy conclusion to come to," Kai simply droned out. "Besides, from how you just reacted, you've quite clearly confirmed that. I mean, are you even trying?"

The silence in the eternal darkness of my mindscape that followed was palpable.

"So what if my life is interlocked with yours!" The wretched voice spat after the long pause, a pout evident in his voice. "You'll die if you don't listen to my instructions anyway."

He could almost hear them cross their arms in annoyance from the voice alone, making Kai scoff amusedly.

"And why exactly should I listen and trust you?" Kai countered. "You've neither told me who you are nor have you even shown your face."

"I'm your only chance at life, don't you feel it?" The voice whispered back, almost as if it was directly behind him, finally having regained its previous mysterious air. "The cold sensation taking hold even here in your mindscape; the chill of death?"

The voice wasn't wrong, and Kai knew it. He could literally feel his mind and body slowly slipping away, and the voice wasn't lying as Kai could always tell for some reason that still eluded him.

However, Kai stood firm.

"I won't do anything before you tell me who you are."

Instead of a response, the voice hissed, clearly infuriated by Kai's stubbornness.

"Who do you think you are - mortal!?" It spat.

"Who I am?" Kai smiled devilishly. "I'm merely the mortal with your life in his hands."

Even in the face of his own impending death, Kai stood ever as firm, knowing that he held all the leverage in this situation.

Another bout of silence ensued where Kai could practically feel the voice's menace and fury, but it calmed down not long after with an excessive sigh.

"Fine..." The voice yielded, but with no small amount of malice in its voice now. "I can't tell you who I am, for both your own and my sake, but I can tell you of my birth-given name."

Kai was about to object to that but realized that the voice wasn't lying as there was only truth in those words which made him pause hesitantly. While Kai seriously didn't enjoy the idea of having an unknown entity... living inside him, and one that could clearly bring him danger with merely its identity, it didn't really seem like he had a choice.

Whether this was something that translucent woman had done, implanting this voice inside him, or something else entirely, Kai didn't know.

Resigning himself, Kai merely nodded.

"My name is Nid'sunr." The voice, now as Nid'sunr, sighed.

Kai didn't recognize it, but he'd take what he could here.

"Then what is it that you wish me to do? I mean, my situation seems rather... hopeless." Kai asked, remembering back to the state that his body had been left in.

"Damn brat... wasting the cosmos' gifts like this," Nid'sunr muttered annoyedly. "Kid, the only reason why you're still alive, is because of that ambient death essence you've been absorbing."

"Death essence?" Kai asked curiously. "You mean one of my augments has been keeping me alive - but it's not even awakened yet?"

"Yes, but only by a thread though." Nid'sunr sighed. "I haven't the faintest idea how you come about your ridiculous augments, but that's for later discussion. The **[Soul Reaper]** augment, although dormant, still has a very minuscule effect on your body. As you've collapsed directly near that wolf you've personally killed, the ambient death energy of its body has been steadily transferred to you overnight."

"I've been out for more than a night?" Kai interjected. "I should've long bled out by now..."

"As I said, the death essence has kept your life from slipping away."

"You're telling me *death* energy kept me alive, how does that make sense?" Kai asked confusedly. "I mean, doesn't that sound rather counterintuitive?"

"I don't have time to lecture you about death energy," He reprimanded, sounding just a tad more urgent than before. "So just shut up and listen."

"The death energy generated by the death of the wolf has been steadily keeping your heart going," Nid'sunr continued to explain. "But it won't be enough, and you've already almost depleted everything it has left to offer. If you do not get another source of energy to keep your heart and mind going, you will die before long."

"And how exactly do I go about getting something like that?" Kai asked incredulously, still very much ill-informed about the world and the seemingly many energies in it.

"Do you not have an augment that converts anything corporeal saturated with essence that you eat?" Nid'sunr asked.

"A magnificent augment indeed- ahem, anyways," He fake coughed. "You just need to eat the wolves and you should be all good to go to survive at least a little bit longer."

"Eat... the wolves?" Kai cringed. "Raw?"

"Do you have time to cook them?" The voice queried lamely. "And even so, you would waste all the wolf's essence with proper knowledge of how to cook essence saturated meat."

"Do they even have enough essence in their bodies, I mean they're animals, not cultivators?" Kai hesitated. "Wouldn't I also get sick and maybe die from disease, I mean it isn't exactly healthy to eat directly raw meat from wild animals and I doubt meat is going to heal my wounds..."

Nid'sunr sighed expansively.

"Damned unknowing younglings, don't have the faintest idea of how the universe works." He muttered distantly. "Of course animals and beasts can absorb essence and cultivate too, some consciously, but most unconsciously.

"Anyways, these wolves have clearly been using this cave as their habitat," He explained. "And since this cave is saturated with essence from the multitude of herbs growing inside, the wolves have slowly been accumulating essence."

"And no, you won't get sick." He scoffed. "Do you really think the augment, [**The Gluttony of the Heavenly Fiend**] is any mere common augment, you brat?!"

"Okay, okay - get on with it." Kai waved his hand dismissively.

"The life attuned essence that comes from their meat will stabilize your wounds, but only so barely," Nid'sunr continued to explain. "This is because your body hasn't even achieved the first **Body Transformation** stage yet, so that minuscule amount essence is more than enough to keep you alive, like how the death essence kept you from succumbing to the clutches of death."

"It will be up to you to fix yourself from there, although your odds don't seem all that great." He added.

"Then what about-" Kai was about to ask another question, but got cut off by him suddenly spitting out a mouthful of blood.

Staring wide-eyed at the blood coating his fingers as he fell to his knees, pain once again wracked his body, Kai shot a scathing glare into the darkness expecting the voice had done this.

"Your mind is giving out and the representation of your body here is dying with it." Nid'sunr hissed, clearly displeased at Kai's immediate distrust.

There was a pause.

"While time isn't stopped inside your mind, time essentially seems much slower as our conversation has progressed through use of thought." He explained as Kai clutched his head in pain. "Your body is dying, and you don't have much more time left, so I'm going to send you out now."

"Wait!" Kai managed to croak.

But he was only answered by the ever-fading voice of Nid'sunr as the surroundings were once again claimed by eternal darkness.

"It will be quite a while before I can contact you again because of my abrupt awakening, so don't go ruining your cultivation or getting yourself killed - you hear me!?"

Kai wanted to protest further as this voice must've had great knowledge of the mysterious of cultivation, but the pain was only increasing as sensation returned to his body. Coughing as dried blood, dirt, and various other filth dried his mouth, Kai groaned.

Every single inch of his body was in agony.

But knowing that he was on death's door, Kai fought through it. Although Kai had been ready for death, he sure as hell hadn't been accepting it, so cracking open his weary eyes, he commanded his savaged body to move.

His vision was blurry at first but quickly returned to a state where Kai could somewhat discern his surroundings. It was a bit dark inside the cave, but it seemed that the sun's ray was streaming into the cave.

He didn't know how for exactly long he had been out, at least the night as the voice, Nid'sunr, had said, but this wasn't the time to worrying about that.

As Kai's eyes focused on the soft and soggy thing he was laying on, he would've jerked away instinctively if not for his aching body.

The wolf he had fallen and he passed out on had somehow turned into a horrid sight. It was as if it had spontaneously rotted for a whole week's worth of time overnight while a vile black inky substance ate away at its flesh and bones. It was barely recognizable.

It was also then that the foul and nightmare-inducing stench hit his nostrils, which would've made him retch right then and there if there had actually been anything in his stomach to throw up.

Making his way off the desiccated and decaying wolf, Kai winced as he could feel some of its rotting flesh and patchy fur stick to his underside, but he ignored it as best as he could.

The thought of what the hell could've done something like that to the wolf briefly flittered through his mind, but Kai needn't long to figure it out even through his haze and pain-addled mind.

Nid'sunr had mentioned that he had been siphoning the wolf's death essence, so Kai just reasoned that this was probably the result of a corpse rotting away with its death essence to support it - or at least something in that vein.

Utilizing the last vestiges of strength in his body, Kai had to stifle a whimper from the pain of making his body crawl towards the closest wolf. Although each small movement caused pure agony to shoot through his veins, Kai fought through it all.

Even as his mind faded in and out of consciousness, nothing would stop his struggle to survive as a newfound fervor invigorated his worn muscles and weary mind.

He didn't know how long it took him, but when Kai finally reached the corpse of the wolf he had savaged to death with his dagger, it was almost as if his body moved on its own, biting down into the wet and soggy mess of its neck, getting a mouthful of patchy fur and flesh.

Stringy, bloody, and smelly, each bit almost made Kai retch on the spot - and he did a few times in fact. However, the taste was the only thing that he somehow didn't mind. The tangy and metallic taste of its blood and the savory raw flesh was shockingly delicious to Kai, even though he knew that this was something that shouldn't have been so good.

But it tasted of... victory... dominance...

Power.

Kai was scared by how much he enjoyed the sensation of eating his vanquished foe. But most concerning was the fact that he couldn't discern if this was an effect of his augment, **[Gluttony of the Heavenly Fiend]** - or something *else...* deep inside him.

True to the words of the voice, Nid'sunr, as the flesh of the wolf started filling Kai's stomach, he could feel the distinctive tingle of essence permeating his body in a warm embrace.

However, instead of the pure and seemingly clear essence that saturated the surroundings, this energy was distinctly different; invigorating and vibrant.

"Was this life essence?" Kai wondered through bites intermittently, marveling as his state of mind ever so slowly returned to a coherent state - no longer on the brink of death.

After a while, Kai finally was unable to eat anymore, feeling so bloated that he might just empty his stomach if he even looked at another piece of meat. But still... that was something inside him screaming for more.

Kai suppressed this feeling, knowing that he was to ever give in, he might never return.

What lingered inside him was *his* power, but only for as long as *he* could dominate it.

[Your body has absorbed the life essence of another being and furthered the progression towards your first **Body Transformation** stage]

[Progression to the next stage: 52% \Rightarrow 63%]
