

Chapter 21 – “The Path of Cultivation”

"That brute, Alark, has been very generous. He even gave you some [**River Lily**] and [**Mother's Kiss**]," Granny Eri cackled gleefully as she peered into the herb bag that Kai had been previously given. "He must've really seen something special in you - they're very potent and not all that common, mind you."

Giving the capricious granny a lop-sided grin, Kai thought to himself internally that the real reason why the warrior leader had given out such valuable resources to him was only partially because he valued Kai's potential, but more so because he dared not to offend Grandma Eri and invoke her wrath by giving her sponsored warrior some shoddy herbs.

"I'll prepare the herbs, go prepare yourself." She paused, casting a hesitant glance my way. "Are you sure do not wish my guidance through this?"

"Thanks, granny, I do appreciate the offer but no." He gently declined. "I wish to see this through myself."

While that wasn't completely true since the real reason why Kai didn't wish Grandma Eri to instruct him through the process of taking an herb bath and improving his warrior constitution was that he already knew that the ways of the tribe in the path of cultivation were grossly flawed.

He already had gotten a small lecture from the capricious but knowledgeable granny, and from that alone combined with all the incorrect and inaccurate information in the [**Warrior Forging**] manual, it was abundantly clear that Kai shouldn't follow the instructions as presented.

He had to find his own way and fill in the gaps.

"Every warrior has their own path, and if I forcefully impose myself onto yours, I would undoubtedly stunt your growth." She sighed, but with an unmistakable glint of appreciation in her eyes as she scrutinized him. "Figure it out at your own pace, and don't you dare disappoint me."

Giving her a winning smile, Kai undressed down to his birthday suit and climbed into the hot tub. It was extremely hot, almost to the point of searing and scalding his skin, but there wasn't any around it as the bath had to be hot enough to draw out all the potency of the herbs.

Scurrying over, granny Eri upended bowls of herbs, pastes, and various liquids she had prepared beforehand. Instantly, Kai was hit with the potent aroma of herbs which made him woozy.

But Kai knew for a fact that it wasn't just because they held medicinal properties but because they were also herbs with high contents of essence.

At the very least, the [**Warrior Forging**] manual hadn't gotten the most basic building block of cultivation wrong, which was the elusive and mystical energy called; essence.

Permeating the air, the earth, and everything in existence, essence was a magical energy that brought out potential in anything it touched and saturated. It could be found anywhere, but some places and objects naturally absorbed this energy, making the contents of essence in them much higher than ordinary.

One such example was the herbs used for Kai's bath. By dissolving their potency and innate essence into the water, Kai would absorb the essence ever so slowly through his pores and skin.

According to the [**Warrior Forging**], there were many supposed ways to increase the amount of essence you could absorb as much of the potency would get lost in the process, but it was all superficial information as with Kai's [**Interface**] he knew most of it was incorrect or a misconception of the intricacies of the energy.

But there was one method mentioned in the manual that suggested that drinking some of the essence permeated water while you're taking the herb bath, which would much increase the amount of essence that your body took in and that would've otherwise been wasted. This wasn't marked as incorrect by [**Esoteric Absorption**], meaning that it was indeed true.

However, there were also mentioned severe consequences to using such a brazen method of forcefully assimilating essence.

There was actually a reason as to why you used the wasteful and inefficient way of herb baths. It was because if you were to ingest anything with high essence contents without any medium to give you small dosages at a time, it could prove severely detrimental to your health and downright lethal in some quantities.

This was essentially parallel to medicine. Any medicine was also a poison, it merely depended on how much of it you administered.

Centering himself, Kai attempted to calm his entire being, blocking out the pain of the bath scolding his skin whilst trying to sense the essence in the water.

Although it was said that it was unknown whether or not it was actually possible to sense essence as most of the tribe's information was purely empirical, Kai was confident that there must be some way or another to feel it or even visualize it in the water.

They thought the way of the [**Warrior Forging**] to be a spiritual process, but since that had been marked as completely wrong by [**Esoteric Absorption**], that could almost only mean that the **Body Transformation** stages were purely physical in nature.

That fact made Kai think.

What did that mean for essence itself then? The assumption of essence was that it was strictly a spiritual type of energy, separate from the physical. But was that really true? If there existed both **Body** and **Soul cultivation**, representing both the physical and the spiritual, then shouldn't it mean that essence was in truth energy that existed on both planes at the very same time?

No easy answers were presented though, but Kai distinctly felt that he had latched onto a very essential and basic truth of cultivation itself, so he felt anything but disparaged by the fact that there were no convenient explanations immediately answered his endless questions.

As if a switch had been flicked in Kai's mind upon the revelation, his body started experiencing an alien sensation. Like comforting pinpricks all over his skin, his body gave off an imperceptible humming of resonance in tune with the sensation. It was as if that feeling and sense had always been there, but it was first now that he had finally discovered it.

There wasn't a shred of doubt in his mind that this sensation was the feeling of essence entering his body. Although it felt invasive, it was an elating experience, almost the good kind of ache you got from pushing your body during training, feeling your muscle become sore with the promise of returning a bit stronger the very next day.

To Kai, the training maniac that he was, this feeling was pure bliss, and he found himself smiling unconsciously. Even though his skin was being scalded by the intense heat of the herb bath and his body battered by the intrusion of essence, the agonizing pain was a mere afterthought.

He hadn't noticed it before now, but ever since discovering this new sense, the essence in the herb bath was ever so slowly, but surely being drawn to him, increasing as time went on. He couldn't extent this sense out any further than just at the surface of his skin, so he didn't know how much essence was left in the bath, but the drain had undoubtedly increased ever since he first jumped in, even though he had no idea of how long it had been since he had entered the bath.

Unbeknownst to Kai though, the worried wisened expression of granny Eri was peering at him from a nearby stool. She was both astonished and worried for the young man, as he had been in the bath for more than about four sticks of incense worth of time now (20 min), and he wasn't even showing a hint of discomfort. In fact, the damned kid was grinning like a fool!

Any ordinary tribesman who hadn't even reached the first stage or taken his first herb bath yet could normally not even last the time it took for a single stick of incense to burn! (5 min). And that wasn't even mentioning the usual expressions of excruciating pain that without fail made their way onto the newly-minted warrior's faces.

But what the blasted brute for a kid did next totally floored the old capricious granny. She was just about to shout out and stop the insane kid when he sunk down to drink a mouthful of the essence permeated water but stopped herself right before she could.

She knew for a fact that Kai wasn't reckless without confidence in himself, and she had already warned him of doing something like this multiple times, so she wouldn't bud in if he truly decided to risk it. But that still didn't alleviate her worries, in the slightest. Amongst all those in the tribe alone, it was only Urok, the chief and the strongest warrior of the tribe, that could confidently drink gulps of water suffused with essence without the worry of harming himself.

But to her astonishment, the kid only merrily swallowed the mouthful water, the change in his facial expression non-existent, other than the slight twist of disgust on his face as he tasted the bitterness of the herbs' potency that had dissolved into the bath.

She let out a sigh of exasperation as she melted into the chair she sat on, shaking her head disbelievingly. Just how many times was this kid going to surprise her? She wondered curiously. Ever since taking in the lost and alienated kid, he had done nothing but continuously surprise the old woman, and pleasantly so.

She had known from the get-go that he was something special, she had a knack for seeing that in people after all, but this one was truly unique. The question then was; just where did he come from?

Kai's eyes finally opened after another four incense sticks worth of time (20), feeling both exhausted and invigorated at the same time. The essence in the bath had greatly subsided, now just to a dull tingle on his skin, barely beyond that of what he felt from the ambient essence in the air when he pulled an arm out of the water to compare.

As he was about to exit the bath, Kai saw that a notification was awaiting his inspection.

[Congratulations! You have awakened your innate essence sense]

[You can now sense the essence permeating existence with your body]

[Your body has absorbed the essence of various herbs and furthered the progression towards your first Body Transformation stage]

[Progression to the next stage: 0% ⇒ 34%]

This was quite the joyous news as the sensation of feeling the essence invading his body hadn't just been a figment of his mind, and that he was essentially already a third of the way to his first stage! This was initially quite surprising since he had already been informed that it was usually only after five or six baths that warrior disciples achieved their first stages, but Kai just attributed that to everything he had learned and done during the bath, including the fact that the herbs given by Alark were apparently of high quality.

Another thing of note was that he had drunk multiple gulps of essence water before reaching the limit his body could take at once. Kai was quite confident that the reason as to why he could so, had to be because of his newly-acquired augments. While they hadn't even been awakened yet, they were already proving immensely useful.

Although he hadn't even gotten to the first stage yet, he could already feel how his body had grown stronger over this very short time, which made him grin from ear to ear. From very rough estimations, Kai guessed that his physical abilities had increased by 5% in total, and while that didn't sound like much initially, for a normal human like Kai to suddenly be five percent stronger, that was a massive increase.

Back on Earth, such small increments of strength were often the decider of whether or not you'd win in fights and nothing a human could easily acquire, and definitely not overnight as he just had.

Kai had essentially already reached the pinnacle of what his body could offer in terms of fighting potential, and he had only experience and skill left to improve his capabilities which already were superb in their own rights. So imagining how much more lethal he had become with this increase even though he was already quite deadly to even 1st-stage warriors, Kai couldn't help but flex his muscles with excitement to be used in combat.

Getting out of the bath, Kai was immediately met with the narrow-eyed stare of granny Eri.

"You've exhausted all the herbs' essence without your body even giving out..." She sighed. "And I had even put whole three-quarters of the herbs you had been given..."

Her gaze was questioning but it also was clear that behind the mask was the glint of pride, like a grandmother proud to see her grandson just having won a medal or a contest.

"Strong physique...?" Kai added awkwardly as he rubbed the back of his head sheepishly, obviously not intending to spill all the beans to the capricious old woman, even though he considered her family already.

Granny Eri was the closest thing to an actual family that Kai had ever had. Callum had at most been a dear friend and Ellie a little sister, but this granny Eri had wormed her way into Kai's heart and by now, and he already practically considered the old woman his grandmother - and he treated her as such.

But it was unquestionable that there laid things much grander than these small swamps, meaning people of much greater power than himself could suddenly find an interest in his knowledge.

Knowledge was power, and strong people both feared and desired such power. As such, Kai wouldn't do anything as reckless as divulging such delicate information to anyone without having a firm grasp of his still very elusive and mysterious situation.

The crackling of a fire with the intermittent sound of critters and muttering between the figures in reptilian leathery armor was the only thing that could be heard in the small clearing.

Occasionally, a sob would escape the two women bound together by the campfire, in clear sight of all the Lurkers so they wouldn't pull any tricks and escape. But they were quickly silenced by either a piercing stare or a firm kick to the ribs which usually did the trick.

The group of eight Lurkers, seven 1st-stage warriors and their leader a 2nd-stage warrior, had ambushed an Eniri hunting party just this morning. The Eniri had originally consisted of four, but unfortunately, they had to kill one of the warriors as he simply wouldn't back down with that tenacious Eniri fervor of theirs and severely injure another who succumbed to his wound a few hours later.

Luckily though, both of the two that they had managed to subdue without heavily injuring them or before they killed themselves, were both female which would fetch a good amount of rations from the slavers, so everybody was in high spirits.

"Here," The lanky-looking leader of the Lurkers said in a hushed tone, indicating to the waterskin in the hand of one of his subordinates.

It was common knowledge to stay silent in the swamps, even if it was daytime as you could never truly know if there were enemies close-by, even with scouts keeping watch.

But the efforts to stay hidden clearly were for naught as when he reached out for the relinquished waterskin, his subordinate let out a pained yelp as he stumbled backward, an arrow planted in his chest.

Eyes widening, the leader moved to scramble to his feet while reaching for his weapon that laid to his side. But before he even got off the log he was sitting on and barely with a moment's time between his subordinate's sudden arrow to the chest, he felt the stinging cold pain of something smoothly punching through the skin of his neck and slicing apart both his arteries and windpipe.

Within mere moments that felt like they lasted minutes, darkness claimed the leader's world as almost his entire neck had been severed apart from the vertebrae tethering his head to his body.

Kai had instantly killed the leader, and even though he had been a 2nd-stage warrior with immense strength, speed, tough skin, and hardened bones, that didn't make him immune to the finality of a cold blade when getting the drop on him and completely unguarded.

Charging into a dash, Kai didn't waste the advantage of surprise as he carried himself storming past the dying Lurker with an arrow to his chest as he feebly gasped for air with blood and spittle painted his lips, his lung clearly having been punctured.

Already out of commission, Kai didn't even spare him a second glance and rammed into the closest Lurker who was scrambling to his feet in shock, the dagger in Kai's hand piercing directly in between the ribs and into the spleen.

"BWARGH!" The Lurker screamed as he stormed to the ground with Kai atop him. "ARGH GET OF-PLURG!"

The protest of the Lurkers cutoff by the twist of Kai's blade, ruining the man's insides and promising a certain death as no healer in the swamps would be able to save such a fatal wound.

Looking up from his perch atop the now screaming man, Kai smiled predatorily as he gazed into the terrified eyes of another Lurker who looked like she was a deer in headlights.

At that moment, the Lurker woman could only process one thought as she crumbled to her knees with the foreboding sense of dread and inevitable doom encompassing her mind as she stared into those eyes of his.

"That was not a man - that was a hungry beast..."