

The Beginning After The End, Chapter 11: To and Fro

It had felt like a good hour before the little elf girl was finally able to settle down. I didn't blame her; being forcibly kidnapped would cause trauma even for adults, even more so since she seemed to be only a bit older than I was.

As sat next to her, comforting her, I realized how bizarre of a scene this made. A four-year-old boy tenderly patting the head of an elven girl in the back of a carriage as four b****y corpses were being devoured by beasts just next to them.

"W-What happened to those bad guys?" she sniffled, her voice coming out a bit nasally.

Not knowing if telling the seven-year-old about killing was appropriate, I simply dismissed it by telling her, "Er... they ran into a very unfortunate accident."

She studied the hesitant expression on my face with the raise of a brow, only to look back down and whisper, "Serves them right." Looking closely at her now, I couldn't help but notice that she carried all of the necessary features that would allow her to blossom into quite the beauty later on in the future.

With long gunmetal gray hair that I mistook for silver in the sunlight, the girl's disheveled state couldn't mask the innate beauty that she seemed to radiate from her pores.

A pair of gleaming teal eyes shaped like perfectly rounded almonds quivered as her perky nose was so red from crying that it matched the color of her rosy lips. While all of her individual facial features seemed to be carefully molded gems, on the fair creamy skin of her face that was the canvas, it brought her features into a surreal, almost phantasmal work of art.

Of course, this was me just observing her from speculatively as a gentlemen and king who enjoyed beauty in the world. I wouldn't go as far to say I was "checking her out".

I helped her up to her feet before speaking again.

"Those people that tried to kidnap you aren't going to chase you anymore. That being said, do you think you can make it to your home by yourself?"

Instantly, her eyes retracted in fear as a panicked expression spread throughout the rest of her face. As tears welled up and both her hands clenched tightly to my shirt, even an infant would be able to tell what her answer was through her actions.

"Look, I need to get home too. Aren't elves generally safe in this forest?" I let out a sigh, trying to pry open her claws— I mean fingers— from my shirt.

She violently shook her head, much like a dog drying itself, and rebutted, "Beasts only scared of adults...Parents warned me that children will get eaten by hounds or tree golems."

I would normally be pretty amazed about something like a tree golem, but it was becoming pretty hard to find something that surprised me after witnessing a demon king metamorph into a dragon.

I rubbed the bridge of my nose, trying to come up with a solution for all of this.

"How long does it take to get to where you live from here?"

"..."

Still holding onto my shabby shirt, she looked down and admitted, "... I don't know."

I held in the temptation to let out another sigh, since the poor girl looked like she was about to cry already, and agreed to take her back home.

The Kingdom of Elenoir was quite a long ways north so my only hope was that there would be a teleportation gate there that can could me back to somewhere, anywhere, in Sapin.

I instructed the elf girl to wait inside the carriage while I gathered some necessities; the main reason being, I didn't want her to see the mangled carcasses of the slave traders when even I found it hard to stomach. Finally finding a backpack small enough for me to wear without it dragging on the ground, I carefully folded and stuffed a small tent inside, along with a leather water bag and some dried rations. I picked up Pinky's knife from the ground where I fought Danton and George and strapped it to the front of my waist to balance the awkwardly large equipment on my back. Before heading back into the carriage, I freed the forest hounds after realizing that, while they were able to pull a carriage, they weren't able to be ridden.

I thought briefly about riding the carriage to the elven kingdom but thought it was too dangerous and we would stick out like sore thumbs in the forest.

"Let's head out now," I said, trying to sound more enthusiastic for her sake.

"En!" She nodded, hopping out of the carriage as I led her away from the carriage where all of the dead bodies were.

I learned a lot about the elf girl along the way. For one, her name was Tessia Eralith and she had just turned five, which meant that she was about a year older than I was, albeit physiologically that is.

Tessia was also a pretty reserved, if not shy, girl. She was very polite to me, considering that younger than she was, and never complained, making her a very agreeable traveling companion. Perhaps, if I wasn't traveling in the opposite direction of my destination, I would have actually enjoyed having her with me.

With the sun setting and the fog thickening we pitched the tent underneath the sprouted roots of a particularly large tree for the night.

I couldn't fit any of the supporting rods in the backpack so used the long rope I brought with me instead and tied on two of the roots and hung tent canvas over it, weighing down the ends with moss-covered rocks. After I finished setting up the tent, I took out a couple of dried rations and handed some to her.

"...Thank you very much." She gave a slight bow.

"You know, you don't have to be so polite to me. I am younger than you and I'd feel a lot more comfortable if you aren't so on edge." I replied, my cheeks full of dried food.

"O-okay, I'll try!" she let out a shy smile as she held back a chuckle.

I began wondering if she had been raised by very strict parents. Maybe it was simply an elf custom and by telling her to be more comfortable with me, I was inadvertently inviting her to marry me. Giving her a shrug, I resumed stuffing my face with more food.

We sat underneath one of the roots of the tree next to our tent and continued chatting.

"C-can you tell me about the human kingdom?" She suddenly asked, her eyes sparkling in curiosity..

"What did you want to know?"

"What is a human city like? How are humans? Is it true that all male humans are perverts and have more than one wife?"

I choked on the dried fruits I was chewing on, spraying them out before they got caught in my lungs.

"No. Although it isn't against the law, only nobilities and the royal families tend to have multiple wives." I said after composing myself, wiping my mouth.

"I see now!" Her eyes seemed to say, still sparkling.

Do you really?

I go on, explaining a bit about the town of Ashber and my family, to pass the time before I asked as well.

“What is it like living in Elenoir?”

“Mmmm....” She pondered a bit before finding the words to explain.

“I don’t think it’s too different from what you told me about where you grew up, except the children all have to go to school to learn about our history and how to read and write. When we awaken, we get mentors assigned to us and we become their disciple. From there, a lot of it is just training with your master.”

“I see...” I mutter, pondering about the different education systems of the humans and elves. While the educational method of the elves were a lot more advanced and indiscriminating, it only worked because the elven kingdom was much smaller and tight-knit compared to the human kingdom, but it just went to show how culture made such a big difference in the future generations.

Getting up from the ground, I held my hand out to help her get up. I noticed her hesitation when she turned a little red, but I assumed it was just my eyes playing with me in the dark.

“Sleep in the tent, I’ll keep guard next to you outside.”

I see her thinking for a little as her eyes were fixed on me, full of resolve.

“I don’t mind sh-sharing the tent, if you’re okay with it.” She tried to sound nonchalant but her voice gave betrayed her..

“It’s okay. I’m not that sleepy right now anyway,” I replied a lot faster than I had meant to.

“...Okay,” she sulked. Did her ears just droop a little?

Making sure she went inside the tent, I leaned against the massive tree trunk and began meditating.

I started inspecting my mana core. Sylvia left me with something she calls her “will” but how does that affect my mana core? Inspecting even closer, I notice, ever so faintly, some markings in my mana core when,

“A-Arthur?” Tessia’s head poked out of the tent.

“Is there something wrong?” I asked, turning my head to face her.

“W-well! You see... beasts will more likely appear if they notice you because they will see that you are a child. Therefore, I propose that for our safety, it would be better for you to c-come inside the tent.” At this point, Tessia had covered her face with the tent’s opening flap, peeking with only one eye.

“Pft~ Tessia, are you scared to sleep by yourself in the tent?” I chuckled.

“A-absolutely not! I was just suggesting, for both of our safety, what the best choice would be!” she insisted leaning out, nearly tumbling out of the tent.

“If that’s the case, then I’ll hide up in the tree and continue to be on the lookout. You know... for ‘our safety’,” I winked.

“Uu...” She hid back herself inside the tent before muttering softly, “...I’m scared to sleep by myself.”

Smiling to myself, I opened the flap and crawled inside the tent.

Caught by surprise, Tessia let out a small yelp before immediately lying down with her back to me. Seeing how red her ears were, I easily could see myself enjoying teasing the poor elf.

After a few silent moments, she peeked over her shoulder. “Can I hold onto your shirt?”

Seeing her trembling, I remembered that she was just a child. I couldn’t imagine how hard it must have been for her; getting kidnapped, being separated from her family and carried off, not knowing if she’ll ever see them again.

Scooting closer to her, I gave her head another soft pat as she turned her body and clutched the edge of my tattered shirt. Her eyes closed in content and after a few minutes, I hear her breathing turn rhythmic, as I began drifting off to sleep too, still sitting up.

My eyes fluttered open on its own and it took a few seconds to remember where I was. I looked down to see Tessia’s head on my lap, her body curled up comfortably.

Gently shaking her awake, I whispered, “Tessia, we should head out now.”

She slowly stirred awake, but when she realized the position we were in, her body shot up with a surprised shriek. “I’m sorry! I didn’t mean to... w-was I heavy?”

“Don’t worry about it. Let’s fold up the tent,” I replied with a wry smile. Her cheeks slightly pink, she nodded in response and we began packing everything up before resuming our journey.

A few more days had passed by fairly uneventfully when, out of nowhere, I was struck with deep aches in my abdomen. The first pains occurred on the third day of the trip; We were inside the tent, Tess already fast asleep, when a sudden searing ache spread from my sternum. It disappeared soon enough, but even that brief moment caused a pain that left me in shivers.

Besides that, the most exciting occurrence was when a couple of forest hounds tried to get close, but a throw of my mana-reinforced knife chased them away.

Nights passed as I continued sleeping in the tent with Tessia and her growing more comfortable around me, at least comfortable enough not to get embarrassed every time she woke up. Our conversations became more natural and had less awkward silence as she began joking around with me, even teasing me about the way I talk; in her words she said that I “tried too hard to sound like an adult.” Fortunately, my worries that the wave of pain might occur again went . our pace wasn’t impeded by any tree golems or even stronger mana beasts looking for children to snack on.

“Can you tell how far we are from Elenoir now, Tessia?” I asked on a particularly clear morning on the fifth day of our journey?

Her elongated ears twitched as she began surveying her surroundings. Suddenly, she ran to a particularly crooked tree and ran her fingers over the trunk. A few minutes of silence went by before she came, visibly excited.

“That tree is one I used to come with my Grandfather sometimes! I remember carving my name into the trunk of the tree when he wasn’t looking. We’re not too far anymore! I think that if we quicken our pace a little bit, we’ll be able to make it by tonight!” she said, pointing to the tree.

“Sounds good,” I answered, following behind her. As lovely as the journey had been, I needed to make my plans to somehow get home, and that wouldn’t be possible until I got her home.

Although, I admit, I’d probably miss her after this.

“Arthur? You said your family and the people close to you called you Art. I feel that, through this journey, I have gotten close enough to call you that as well.” We were crossing a stream atop a moss-covered log bridge when she suddenly stopped. “So... can I call you Art as well?” Tessia turned around, revealing a wide smile.

“Hmm? Sure, I don’t mind,” I said, returning her smile.

“You’ don’t mind’? Tch, you could sound a bit more enthusiastic...” she stuck her tongue out at me.

“I would be honored to be called Art by you, your highness,” I made a bow gracious enough for a noble despite my tattered clothes.

“Hehe, and you may also have the honor to call me Tess,” she giggled, curtsying back at me before turning back around and hopping off the log.

We continued on the rest of the day, with only a few quick stops to rest ourselves and replenish our stomachs. Constant use of mana rotation had kept my body from being strained, but it was obvious that Tess was growing more weary.

After our last quick rest on a soft patch of moss, we continued forward for the last stretch. Tess and I had gotten a lot closer on this journey; the once shy and reserved elf girl showed bright smiles that were contagious despite our less than comfortable conditions. She would continue teasing me too, saying that I should call her older sister since she was a whole year older than I was. I teased her back, imitating her when she was crying, rubbing my eyes and yelling, "WAAA~ MOMMY, I'M SCARED!" This turned her bright red. She smacked my arm before she started to pout. Crossing her arms and lower lip protruding, she stomped off before yelling, "HMPH! Meanie!"

It was dusk now and the fog around us seemed to be getting thicker. My sense of direction was all but useless in this blasted forest. Enough so that, if I were to get separated from Tess, I could wind up travelling in circles without even realizing it.

She suddenly turned to me, her face a mixture of happiness and hesitation before she muttered, "We're here."

Looking around, the only things visible were clusters of trees and fog. Confused, I was about to ask where we were, but I stopped myself when I saw Tess placing both her palms on a tree and muttering a chant.

Suddenly, the fog around us was sucked into the same tree and what came into vision was a giant wooden door that seemed to be propped up by itself on the ground.

Tess grabbed my hand and pulled me towards the door. When she opened it, I was reminded of the portal that Sylvia had pushed me through. The experience didn't feel any better the second time but I at least knew what to expect. As we softly landed on our feet, arriving at our destination, I immediately rummaged through my bag to make sure I still had the stone Sylvia entrusted me with. It was only after confirming that it was still there did I finally look up and take in the scene around us.

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