

The Beginning After The End, Chapter 12: Meeting

Pristine.

That was the word that popped into my head as I gawked at the elven city. It appeared we had directly teleported right past the gates. What I saw before me were buildings that seemed to be built out of a jade-like material. These jade buildings were so flawless and smooth that each seemed to be carved from a single, huge stone.

Making this place look even more awe-inspiring were the huge trees that intertwined with the buildings, filling this whole city with a more distinctive and organic ambience. Looking up, I see homes built on unnaturally thick branches extending out of the massive trunks even larger than the buildings with smoke drifting out of their chimneys.

The entire ground inside this city was covered in a lush field of soft moss, with only the narrow sidewalks and the main road paved with smooth stone. The dense array of branches that fanned out from the trees covered most of the city in a canopy of shade, but there was a warm, luminescent glow throughout the city thanks to numerous floating orbs of light situated in every corner and street.

While I stood, slack-jawed, still processing the world around me, a shadow whizzed in front of me suddenly, jolting me awake.

Tess was still holding onto my hand when a group of what seemed like guards arrived out of nowhere. These elven warriors emanated a dignified air, all dressed in coordinated black suits with green trimmings and a golden shoulder guard on their left shoulder. These five guards all carried a rapier strapped to their waist. I mentally noted that these guards had no sensible aura radiating out of them.

Augmenters and conjurers both naturally emit a faint aura from their bodies. The fact I wasn't able to sense any mana leaking meant one of two things: Their mana cores were at a high enough level where I wasn't able to sense it, or they had enough control over their mana to not let any leak out. Either way, it meant that these guys were as impressive as their attire made them look.

The guards ignored my presence as they suddenly kneeled in front of Tess in unison. "We welcome back the royal princess."

"..." My gaze flicked back and forth between the guards and Tess and I'm reminded of the time when I jokingly called Tessia 'your highness'.

Tessia was actually the princess of this whole kingdom?

When I tried to let go of Tessia's hand she suddenly squeezed her hand tighter. In a voice so cold and apathetic that I mistook her voice for someone else's, she said, "You may rise."

They stood up with their right fist still crossing their chest when the knight in front speaks. "Princess, we arrived as soon as we saw that the royal teleportation gate had been used. The King and Queen are..."

Before he could finish speaking, I heard a cry not too far away.

"My baby! Tessia, you're okay! Oh my baby!"

Running towards us was a middle aged man and woman. From the crown on the man's head and the tiara encircling the woman's forehead, I assumed that they were the King and Queen.

The King's tall, built body was uniformed in a loose, decorated robe. His emerald eyes were pointed upwards and his thin lips were tensed, matching his short, military style hair.

While the King had a dignified but somewhat reserved appearance, the Queen was breathtaking. Although she was a bit past her youthful stage, her age couldn't mask the beauty that she was. Her round eyes shimmered a light blue hue, contrasting well with her lush, pink colored lips. Her silver hair was curled down, flailing past her back as she ran towards us, her well-proportioned figure visible underneath her dress.

The mother's cheeks were lined with tears as the father had a tense expression that looked like he was holding back tears as well.

I turned my gaze to see Tessia's face visibly soften as she started tearing up as well. I let go of her hand and gently pushed her towards her parents, feeling a little sentimental myself.

Tessia landed in the arms of her mother who started sobbing at this point on their knees, both burying their face in their daughter's shoulders.

The last to arrive was an old man well past his prime. His facial features are all sharp, with a gaze that could kill someone on contact. His hair was pure white and was tied in the back, face cleanly shaven. This elderly man didn't say anything, but his eyes did warm up a little when he saw Tessia.

It took a several minutes for Tessia and her parents to settle down. In the meantime, the guards were glaring at me with daggers in their eyes, as even the elder was eyeing me curiously.

The King finally stood up and while his eyes were red, he still carried an air of dignity. "As the King of Elenoir and the father of Tessia, I must apologize for this unsightly appearance of mine and more importantly, I wish to thank you for escorting my daughter back home safely," he stated, his voice coming out a bit hoarse. "Please accompany us to our home so that you may rest. After, you can tell us what happened."

His tone was gentle but implied that there wasn't really an option, so I simply nodded in consent. As I was about to follow behind them, Tessia came to me and grabbed my hand again, filling the surrounding people with expressions of shock. I couldn't help but chuckle uncomfortably as I scratched the side of my head, unable to muster up the appropriate words for a situation like this.

After a strenuously awkward ride that seemed a lot longer than it actually had been, we arrived at the castle. Rather than a castle, however, it looked to be an enormous tree. This tree, that probably needed at least a few hundred people locking arms to encircle it, was made of a white stone that, I could only guess, had gone through a petrification process somehow.

Stepping through the front doors of the tree, I was pleasantly surprised to see how impressive the interior of this castle was. There were two curved staircases that created a circle, with a gigantic chandelier floating in the middle of it. This chandelier seemed to be made of the same orbs of light that were dotted throughout the city.

I had told the King and Queen that it wasn't necessary for me to rest and would rather tell them as soon as we arrived, so that's what we did.

Not even washing up, the welcoming crew was all situated around the rectangular dining table downstairs. Tessia's father was on the far end of the table with me directly opposite of him. Tessia's mother sat perpendicular to her husband, with Tessia seated right next to her. The grandpa was sitting across from the mother and daughter, leaving a pretty big gap between us, while the five guards stood off to the side behind the King.

With both his elbows resting on the table, fingers intertwined, the King was the first to speak. "Child. What did you say your name was?"

"Forgive me for the late introduction. My name is Arthur Leywin, and I come from a remote town in the Kingdom of Sapin. A pleasure to make your acquaintance King, Queen, Elder, and gentlemen." I stood up and bowed slightly at each of them individually before sitting back down.

Discussion wasn't going to progress if they were going to treat me like a child.

Both the King and Queen and the guards in the back showed evident looks of surprise from my mature behavior, while even the grandpa had an amused smirk on his face; Tessia giving me a shy smile.

Regaining composure, the King continued on. "It seems you are much more mature than your age. Forgive me for assuming. My name is Alduin Eralith and this is my wife, Merial Eralith and my father Virion Eralith. As for what happened, please tell us. We would like to hear your side of this."

Waving off the apology, I began telling the story. I made sure to be very vague in telling them how I got inside the Forest of Elshire in the first place; I simply told them I had gotten separated from my family after running into bandits, only managing to survive out of luck.

Inevitably, I had to tell them I was a mage. This was followed by another wave of looks of utter disbelief from everyone, including Tessia. Because of the lack of obstacles we ran into on our journey back, I never really had the need to use mana so I didn't bother explaining.

One of the guards told me that I was a liar and to prove that I was actually a mage when, unexpectedly, Tessia's grandfather shut him down. He then clasped his hands together on the table and looked at me with a renewed, eerie interest.

I quickly moved on, telling them how I had spotted a carriage and observed them carrying a tied up child into the back of a carriage before going off.

At this, the King slammed both of his hands on the table, his eyes narrowing into a menacing glare.

"I should've known it was humans..."

I corrected his mildly racist comment and said, "They were slave traders. Them and bandits alike prey on, not just elves, but humans as well, speaking as a victim myself."

This caused the King to shut his mouth before sitting back down, letting out a soft cough.

"I didn't ask Tess... *ahem* the Princess this, but I am curious as to how slave traders even got their hands on the princess of this kingdom," I queried, almost calling Tessia by her nickname. I didn't think calling her something so informal as Tess would sit right with everyone present.

At this, the King almost looked embarrassed before saying, "My wife and I had a bit of a disagreement with Tessia and she decided to rebel by running away. We had decided to let her cool off a bit before fetching her back because we knew where she usually stayed when she pouted, but unfortunately, she ran into some hu... slave traders."

Ah... runaway princess. I sneak in a small grin at Tess and she responded by sticking out her tongue, face flushed.

I glazed over the details of the fight with the slave traders.

"Luckily, I had caught the slave traders by surprise and managed to dispose of them before untying the princess and escorting her here."

“So a four-year-old managed to ‘luckily’ kill off four adults, one being an augmenter at that, and you simply wave it off like it’s no big deal,” chimes in the king’s father seated across from Tessia, leaning back on the chair so only two of the legs are touching the ground.

“Yes. Half of them were asleep and the two were simply not on guard so disposing of them was not too challenging,” I refuted back.

The elder just responded with a lazy shrug of his shoulder.

After finishing the events, I cleared my throat before asking what I came here for. “As I have mentioned, it has been almost two months since I have seen my parents. I do not plan to intrude on your kingdom for long as I wish to meet them quickly, so I was wondering if you guys had a teleportation gate that could take me to the City of Xyrus or anywhere inside Sapin.”

“You’re going to leave already, Art?!” Tessia shot up from her seat, face stricken with panic.

Both her mother and father gave each other a baffled look as they mouthed ‘Art’.

The elder just shot snide grin at this and chuckled, rocking on his chair.

“I don’t think it’s appropriate for a human such as myself to be inside this Kingdom for too long, Princess. Besides, I wish to make sure that my family is safe and tell them I’m okay as well,” I answered, giving a sheepish smile.

The King responds back for Tessia. “It has been a couple hundred years since the last human has stepped foot into the Kingdom of Elenoir and you, Arthur, are the first human to be in the capital of this Kingdom, the City of Zestier. However, saving our daughter and taking the trouble to accompany her all the way back to us entitles you with a proper reward...”

I take a quick peek at Tessia and see her head down, her gunmetal silver hair covering her face.

“...Unfortunately, the teleportation gate linked with the Kingdom of Sapin opens only once every seven years, for the Summit Conference between the three races. Since the last Summit was two years ago, it’ll be another five years until the gate will function,” the King continued.

I couldn’t help but let out a deep breath in disappointment.

“However, we are more than willing to send a group of guards to escort you back home. You are correct that it may not be wise to stay in this kingdom for too long. While some

are tolerant, many hold animosity towards humans because of the war long ago.” He flashed a brief, sorrowful smile at this.

I nodded in agreement. At least I’d be able to safely go back home.

“For now, please make yourself at home here. We will have your escorts prepared by tomorrow morning. I do advise you not to wander around outside in the city though, for the reasons mentioned earlier.”

The King snapped his finger and an elderly elf lady in a tan maid uniform rushed out, leading me to my room.

The room I was led to was large, but elegantly simple in furnishings. While the only furniture consisted of a couch, tea table, bed, and dresser, each looked to be handcrafted out of wood by seasoned craftsmen. As soon as I got into the room, I closed the door behind me, stripped and went straight for the bathroom. The shower was a pleasant surprise; it was a simple waterfall that seemed to naturally flow from the ceiling and drain back out in the floor. However, the constant flow of water that didn’t seem to ever turn off was a surprisingly pleasant temperature, just warm enough to relax my body and pores.

As I finished dressing into a very silky robe just for your top and short pants, I placed the stone Sylvia left me inside the chest pocket inside my robe and once again, tried to study my mana core.

About thirty minutes in and making only minimal progress, I hear a knock on my door.

“Coming!”

Opening the door, I’m greeted by a pouting Tessia who threw a light punch at my chest.

“You d***y! Why did you act all unfriendly when you were with my family back there,” she harrumphed, slipping past me and sitting on my bed.

“Well first of all, you didn’t mention to me that you happened to be the princess of this entire kingdom!” Shaking my head, I gripped Tessia’s hand and pulled her out of my room. Kids or not, I didn’t think her parents were going to like her being in a boy’s room.

“Come on, show me around the castle! I won’t get the chance to visit this place again.” I immediately regretting saying this.

I hear a slight snuffle as Tessia suddenly broke down into tears, trying to talk while sobbing.

“Art! I don’t want you to *Sniff* leave...”

“...You’re the first *Sniff* person I’ve gotten ever close to...”

“ ... ”

I just gently patted her head while she was rubbing her eyes with the arm not holding onto my hand.

As we continued walking in silence, except for Tess’ soft sniffles, we made it outside, in the courtyard at the back of the castle. The floating orbs were giving off a dim, luminescent glow, lighting up the well-kept garden in a gentle atmosphere.

I couldn’t help but imagine how differently this scene could’ve been played out if we were ten years older.

Before I even had the chance to finish my thought, A blatantly clear killing intent bombarded my senses. Milliseconds later a faint glimmer gave off the position of a projectile aimed at Tessia. I pushed the still crying princess out of the way and I prepared to parry the projectile with a mana infused hand.

At that instant, a figure in black was facing my back, his right arm in a stance to attack. Grabbing the projectile, I immediately spun myself to block the assassin with whatever was thrown at me. To my surprise, I was face to face with Tessia’s grandfather.

I jumped back out of range from before angrily shouting, “What the hell! Why are you trying to kill us?”

“Kid. It may hurt a little but I doubt that toy you’re holding could kill anyone,” he chuckled.

I looked down at my hand to see a pencil sized projectile with both ends blunted and coated in a layer of something close to rubber.

I was tricked!

“Haha! Nice reaction, nice reaction! I didn’t think you’d catch my little present and use it to block my next attack! Truly marvelous! However, your usage of mana was mediocre at best!”

He proceeded to throw me a wooden sword fit for my size as he took out a wooden sword of his own, just a bit bigger.

“Here I come!” Not even giving me the time to get in a stance or even the chance to accept his impromptu training, he dashed towards me.

This crazy old bat!

I lowered stance and , instead of being defensive, I launched myself at him as well, accelerating my speed to throw off the timing of his swing. Aiming for the fingers gripping his sword, I swung upward, reinforcing my entire body.

Right before my sword came into contact with his hand, I was met with only air as he disappeared from my sight.

Whipping my head back, I spotted him a couple meters apart from where I was standing.

“You’re a scary little brat, aren’t you? Looks like I’ll have to be a bit more serious!” the grandpa smirked.

His speed increased even more. Even with my previous life being a life of only training and battles, I was only barely able to keep him in my sight. However, being able to see him and being able to respond to his attacks are two different things.

I felt like a sandbag as I could only curse at my own body.

I was able to block one move of his out of every three he landed on my body.

Screw technique, this old bat was messing with me through sheer speed. The only reason I was able to somewhat keep up was by using sword techniques and footwork to minimize my movement, along with the fact that, because of my size, I was a small target.

After about ten, long minutes of being treated like a wooden training post, I started noticing some patterns in the grandpa’s attacks.

As he flashed behind me about to do a horizontal sweep to my legs, I put all of my strength into my legs and leaped back with my sword tucked into my armpit pointing at his head.

With a solid thud created from my blow landing, the old bat stumbled a little before gaining balance.

“HAHAHAHA! I guess I deserved that one!” he laughed, rubbing his swollen forehead.

Throughout all of this, Tessia was surprised at first but after realizing it was just a spar, she settled down. She used this chance, though, to jump out and stomp towards the elder.

“Grandpa! You hurt Art too much! You should’ve gone easier on him!” Pinching the elder’s side.

“AHH! That hurts little one. Haha I’m afraid if I went easier on Arthur, he’d be the one bullying me!” he gently answered as he picked up his granddaughter.

He flashed in front of me and suddenly places his right palm into my sternum.

“Just as I thought. Your body is in a dangerous state...”

I stared blankly at him. Through constant use of mana rotation and meditation, my body should be a lot healthier than even the most well-fed four-year-old.

Virion, noticing my doubtful gaze, pressed his palm on my sternum at a certain angle, triggering a familiar searing pain.

“Your mana manipulation is good for a beginner despite your age, and your sword techniques and fighting experience are frightening enough to make me wonder what sort of life you had led to learn all of this.” His eyes narrowed. “But you failed to mention one critical thing in your story earlier.”

I could feel my heartbeat beginning to rise as I started to suspect that he found out about Sylvia.

“I’ve decided. Arthur, become my disciple!” He nodded, throwing me entirely off guard.

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