

After The End 21

The Beginning After The End, Chapter 21: Everybody Wins

“No! Absolutely no way! Arthur! Do you know how dangerous it is to become an Adventurer? You’ve just gotten back after we all thought you were dead and now you’re saying you want to go get yourself killed out there? No way! Absolutely not.”

My mother was on the verge of tears while she said this. She had never been good at controlling her emotions. Eleanor was besides her, clutching onto her leg.

“Mama, don’t be angry. Bruhder not bad a person! Uuu... Mama, don’t cry.”

Director Goodsky had left the manor after my announcement. I could tell she still wanted to ask me a lot of questions but we excused ourselves to have a family talk. We were currently inside my parent’s room with my mother standing up in front of me, forbidding me to even think about doing anything remotely dangerous.

Father was a bit more rational. I could tell he didn’t like the idea as well, but he couldn’t really see any reason for me not to be an adventurer besides my age.

I wasn’t going to debate with my mother. She was saying all of this because she was worried and I could never blame her for that. It was something I had expected and I wanted to slowly ease her into the idea, but the meeting with Director Goodsky threw the timing off of everything .

After being silent the whole time, my father finally spoke up. “Honey, let’s hear Arthur out at least. I’m not saying I agree to him becoming an adventurer but don’t you think we should at least listen to what he has to say?”

“How can you still say that after what happened that day!” my mother yelled, breaking down into a fit of s**s.

I looked to my father for answers, curious about what she was talking about, but he simply shook his head and comforted my mother.

It seemed like a good hour before she had calmed down enough for us to speak again.

I grabbed my mother’s hands. “Mom. I wasn’t planning on leaving tomorrow. I was looking forward to spending a few months at home with you guys.”

She was still silent, but her face softened a little at that and I just gave her a warm smile, Sylvie followed suit and began licking her hand.

“What I meant by becoming an adventurer was so that I can get some experience. After being in the Elf Kingdom for three years, I missed a lot about what I should know about this world of ours. I just thought that becoming an adventurer would be the best way to gain some practical experience,” I urged, not letting go of Mother’s hands.

"I understand where you're coming from, Arthur. Although I was a bit older, I was also itching to get some real life experience in fighting as soon as I awakened as a mage," he reminisced. "But your mother is also right in that it is dangerous, and unpredictable."

My mother nodded her head vigorously at this.

I stayed silent for a little bit as I pondered.

"Dad. Mom. What if I were to have some sort of guard or supervisor with me? Would that make you feel a bit more at ease with this whole idea?"

"..."

"Hmm... You know, that's not a bad idea." I could almost see the gears in my father's head wind as he began thinking of potential candidates.

"B-but... I still won't be able to see you for three years!" My mother began to protest again.

Shaking my head, I say to her. "Mom, I'm not going to go on long trips or go on dangerous missions to faraway places. I'll try to come back every few months, maybe even more frequently than that, depending on what I do."

"Bruhder, are you leaving?" My sister had an expression as if she had just been told that Santa didn't exist.

I started to panic. "Nono Ellie I'm staying here. You'll be seeing your brother a lot from now on, okay?"

Apparently, both my mother and father had told Eleanor a lot of stories about me and how strong and smart I was. One of Ellie's favorite bedtime stories was how I saved Mother from a bunch of bad guys on top of a cliff and that I got hurt so it'll take me some time to come back home. Eventually, I had become some sort of hero to my sister.

I look back at my mother. Her face was considerably more at ease after talking about this. I guess she had just assumed the worst-case scenario and thought I wanted to slay the world's strongest evil at the age of eight or something.

"Why did you want to be an Adventurer before even going to school anyways? Wasn't it usually the opposite?" my mother softly muttered.

"Dad's reason was a part of it; I want to test my skills out in real life situations. Also, Mom, I want to at least try to fit in with everyone when I go to school. It would be a lot harder to fit in if I began school at the age of eight. I don't think I'll be able to make much friends with such a big age difference."

It was a very pitiful excuse, but, for once, my mother gave me a look of understanding. I guess it was a mother's worst nightmare for her child to become a loner.

It wasn't a complete lie because I said it thinking of Sylvia's dying wish. She had wanted me to enjoy life and have a life not just of training. This was a promise that I planned on keeping no matter what.

"Besides, I'm going to be here for a couple of months anyway. Who know, maybe you'll get sick of me by then and throw me out before I even get the chance to leave," I winked at my mother.

That earned me a thump on the head but she chuckled as well. "You! You're just like your father at times like these. Thank God you at least have my intelligence." She gave me a big hug, leaving me with a warm feeling that I still wasn't used to.

"Hey! What about my intelligence! He was gifted with my adept abilities in fire too!" My father protested.

"Hmph! My son got his deviant powers from me." Mother just turned me away from my father and just stuck her tongue out at him.

"Ellie too! Bleh!" My sister copied my mother and stuck her tongue out at my devastated father.

"Sniff! No ones on my side." He just playfully cried, trying to hug his my daughter. This left us all in a fit of laughter.

The next day was a Sunday, leaving my father with the day off. Both the Leywin and Helstea family were dining together for breakfast. "So did you guys settle on what to do about Arthur?" Vincent asked, half chewing on his omelet.

Tabitha shook her head; "I swear. Sometimes, I have such a hard time believing you're a noble with your horrible dining habits, dear."

"Kukuku, don't worry. At least your husband's better than mine. Remember that one dinner party where Rey spit out his food from laughing so hard? I had to use Ellie as an excuse to leave the table because I was so embarrassed," My mother just sighed.

"Cough! Anyways! Yes, after talking about it yesterday night, we agreed to let him become an adventurer under some conditions, Vince." My father just lightly blushed as he tried to switch back the topic.

"Oh? What conditions?" responded the curious Tabitha as she was cutting the omelet into smaller pieces for Lilia.

"He's not going to become an adventurer until after his birthday, which is in three months. We also decided on having a guard with him on his missions. Besides that, I feel like he'll be smart enough to manage the rest on his own. Of course, the last condition is that he'll be visiting as often as possible," my father explained, working on the rest of his roast beef.

"Do you have anyone in mind for who his guard is going to be? Heck, is there even a guard that is capable of guarding him? I feel like Arthur would be the one protecting the guard!" He just chuckled at the ridiculousness of an eight year old protecting a grown, veteran adventurer.

My mother answered him, looking at my father, "We haven't really thought of a person that fits the criteria. Rey and I thought we could use one of the Helstea Auction guards, but we couldn't really come up with anyone."

"Can I have more omelet please?" My sister chimed in with her fork raised in the air.

"I got it!" My father stood up from his sudden revelation, making me almost choke on the piece of meat that was in my mouth.

“The Twin Horns will be coming back from an expedition in a dungeon soon. I received a letter from the Adventurer Guild Hall that says they should be back within two months! It’s perfect! Why did it take so long for me to think of this? We can just have one of the Twin Horns to look after you. Arthur! You still remember them right?” My father’s eyes shined in excitement.

“Hey! That’s not a bad idea!” My mother said from the kitchen, her voice implying the rarity in my father having a good idea.

Handing a piece of meat to Sylvie who was perched on my lap with her front two paws on the table, I responded too. “Of course I remember them. That sounds like a great idea Dad. Do they know I’m back?”

“No, unfortunately, I haven’t had the chance to send a mail to them yet. I was planning on doing that today.” My father sat back down, scratching his head.

Vincent chimed in on the conversation after finishing off his breakfast.

“Arthur, you said to Director Cynthia yesterday about not showing your powers to anyone until you enroll into Xyrus Academy, right? How were you planning on doing that while you’re an Adventurer?”

“Ah yes. I’ve been meaning to get to that,” I said while picking up a strawberry with my fork. “I planned on keeping my identity hidden as an adventurer. I’ve read that there were many members of the Adventurer’s Guild that went by aliases, not revealing their identities to the public.” Unfortunately, since there was no way of masking the appearance of Sylvie, I would just have to do a good job of hiding her. Thankfully, she was small enough to fit inside a cloak if the pocket was big enough.

“Mmm... I see.” Both Vincent and Tabitha nodded at this.

With that, breakfast ended and we all separated.

Father went to the Guild Hall to send a letter to his old party members while my mother and Tabitha went shopping, taking Ellie and Lilia along with them. They asked me to come as well but I politely declined the offer to endure the suffering they call a pastime event.

I washed up and headed towards the right wing of the manor, where Vincent’s office was.

Knock *Knock*

“Yes?”

“It’s Arthur,” I answered.

The door opened to reveal Vincent with a curious look on his face. “Ah come in! What brings you here Arthur? You’ve never really come into my office before.”

“Ah yes. There is a certain matter I wish to talk to you about today, which is why I visited,” I said while looking around at the piles of documents on the floor and on his desk.

VINCENT HELSTEA’S POV:

Was this child really only eight years old?

Shivers ran down my spine at the tone of his voice. Why was I so nervous at the mention of a 'certain matter' he wanted to talk to me about?

"What sort of matter is it?" I just asked, my face turning a bit more serious.

"I would like your help in obtaining a few items that might be hard to find elsewhere." Continuing, he sat down and said with his eyes looking straight at me. "I need a sturdy hooded cloak or robe and a mask that can cover my entire face. It's imperative that the mask has the function of changing my voice."

It wasn't hard to figure out why he wanted these items. As the owner of the Helstea Auction House that attracted even the highest of nobles and even the Royal Family, it shouldn't be too hard to get these items. The mask might be a little tricky because a sound elemental artificer would need to be the one to make this but it could be done.

Yet... why is there such a heavy feeling in this room?

I couldn't quite place my finger on it...

That's it!

Why was this eight-year-old child giving off the same pressure as the time I was next to the King of Sapin himself?

No. The atmosphere now was even heavier than when I was with the king.

He was clearly asking me for a favor. But it felt as though he is gauging me, almost as if he was trying to evaluate where to put me on his list of 'people to keep alive'.

I had never felt this from him, but that was probably because I had only ever seen him with his family.

I quickly replied, wanting to get it over with. "Sure, it shouldn't be a problem getting those things. The mask might take a bit of time but I'm sure we'll have it before you become an Adventurer."

His slight nod actually filled me with relief. I had nobles that waited in line to introduce themselves to me but this kid...

"Is there anything you would need my help in for in exchange? I would feel bad just asking for this without any compensation." He responded.

I felt a little sweat forming above my brows. "I-it's fine really. I owe your father a lot, actually. He may be working for me but the way he trains my guards have really lessened the number of problems that happen during the auctions."

This was the truth actually. Rey had become an irreplaceable part of the Helstea Auction Houses. His leadership and charisma amongst the guards he trains is first class. I owed him when he saved my life and I owe him and his family now. Even with the generous salary that is well above the average and letting his family stay in our house, I still felt that it was actually a bargain on my part. Both Tabitha and Lilia have been happier now than ever after Rey moved in with Alice and had Ellie. I had always been filled with guilt for not being able to spend as much time with my family as they wanted but things were a lot better now.

“Hmm, speaking of training, that actually gives me an idea,” He muttered while looking down.

I’ve noticed quite a while ago that, when Arthur started thinking, he had this look... this look where his gaze focused afar and his brows furrowed; the subtle crease near his lips and the slight twitch of his nose made him appear to be thinking of something above what normal human intelligence would be capable of. It was the look of a true intellectual. Sigh. It’s hard to believe that he was the same age as my little Lilia.

“Allow me to start training your daughter to become a mage.” He put down this landmine as if he was just talking about the weather.

ARTHUR LEYWIN’S POV:

“I had been meaning to start teaching my baby sister in mana manipulation soon. It wouldn’t be too much trouble to include Lilia in these lessons. I noticed that both you and Lady Tabitha are not mages so it might be impossible for her to awaken by herself, but if we start now, I think she’d be able to awaken around the average age,” I said.

My statement was met with silence. I looked up to see Vincent drop the stack of papers had been fumbling with nervously. His face was frozen in place as I could hear his heart beating faster.

“C-can I truly believe what you just said? Can you really allow my daughter to become a m-mage?” He asked after a seemingly long moment of silence.

“Sure. It’ll be a long process but it’s definitely possible. Er... I will have to ask you to keep the lessons on a low profile though. I would hate to be bombarded with doting parents asking to make their children into mages,” I just chuckled, trying to lighten up the tension.

He nodded furiously after failing to form a coherent sentence..

“Sincerely... there would be no greater happiness than seeing my daughter become a mage,” he managed to stammer out, tears on the verge falling down.

“Great! Then I’ll leave the items we discussed to you! Now, allow me to excuse myself out. Sorry for intruding in on your work.”

I walked myself out of the room, picking up the sleeping Sylvie from my lap.

I’m glad that worked out well.

The Beginning After The End – Chapter 22: For Them

LILIA HELSTEA’S POV:

I’m shopping with Mommy and Lady Alice and Ellie. Ellie seemed a little bit disappointed that her brother didn’t want to join us so I was holding her hand to comfort her.

“Hey Ellie. Do you like your big brother that much?”

“En! But he’s a meanie for not shopping with us. I wanted to dress him up more,” she pouted.

“Do you like me better or your big brother?”

After some time of thinking she just responded, "Umm...I like both!"

"Kukuku. Lilia, what are you asking Ellie?" My mom asked, pulling my other hand. "Lilia, what do you think of Arthur?"

"Uuu he's a little scary. How is he so strong, Mommy? I thought kids like us couldn't be mages until we're all grown up?" It wasn't fair. I've always dreamt of becoming a mage and making Mommy and Papa happy.

My mom looked at Lady Alice, "I guess it's because he's a very gifted child. But Alice, do you really have no problems with everything he told you? I don't mean to b**t in on your parenting but doesn't it just seem a little too weird? How did he get so powerful during this time? You've told me that he was pretty good at fighting even before the bandit attack."

I saw Lady Alice shake her head. "Of course I know he's hiding a lot of things. He probably doesn't know but it's pretty obvious when he's lying. He tends to focus his gaze on one point and his voice turns monotone when he lies. It's pretty cute how he thinks he's being sneaky actually. 'Sigh', Tabitha, I know he's keeping things from us and so does Rey, but we agreed on giving him some space until he's comfortable enough to tell us himself. I guess that's just what it means to be a parent. I know he doesn't mean any harm so all we can do is just support him until he's ready."

"Lying is bad!" Little Ellie declared.

I agreed with her on that. "Yeah Ellie! Lying is bad!"

ARTHUR LEYWIN'S POV:

I start concentrating on my mana core, distracted by a series of unexplainable sneezes. I was getting too impatient with my training. I wanted to hurry up and get to the previous level in my past life but that wasn't happening as fast as I wanted it to.

The little fight with Director Goodsky made it all too real for me. I was too inexperienced and weak. It didn't really affect me until now, but I'm wasn't used to fighting the way mages fought in this world. The fact that there was nothing like conjurers in my previous world made fighting one a lot more difficult.

My concentration wavered while my mind flashed back to my past life. The scene on that foggy night when the orphanage's head caretaker, the closest thing to a mother figure I had, was shot. I was still young at that time, but if I think back now, that was probably the reason I had started training like a madman. Head Mother was the one that picked me off the streets, giving me a steamed bun. After that, she took care of me, taught me how to read and write, scolded me and taught me basic manners.

I didn't want to become a king; I just wanted vengeance. I just wanted to be strong enough to kill the ones responsible for the death of the person who had taken care of me... who had loved me. It was never as simple as that, though. It had turned out that the ones responsible for killing the orphanage head caretaker, along with other leader figures of the various orphanages, were the military from another country.

I realized then that no matter how powerful an individual was he was still just one person. I needed authority along with my power. Becoming a king then served its purpose. The first thing I did when I was appointed King was destroy that country. I bloodied my hands with the corpses of hundreds of

thousands of soldiers and millions all together. The cruel thing, though, was that no matter what kind of revenge is taken, it didn't change what had happened to her. She still had died an unjust death.

This life was going to be different. I wasn't going to let the ones I treasured suffer.

Sylvie nudged her wet nose at me, a concerned gaze fixed on my eyes. 'I'm here, feel better' was what she seemed to say to me.

Petting her head, I stirred myself out of my unpleasant memories.

I washed myself off, laughing at the crying Sylvie who still hated getting wet. I was glad I had her by my side. It wasn't healthy for me to be alone thinking by myself for too long.

Just on time, the girls got back from their shopping trip by the time I had finished dressing up. I hopped down the stairs to greet them.

"Hmph! Brother is a meanie!" My sister just puckered her lower lip with her arms crossed.

"Is it because I didn't go shopping with you, Ellie? I'm sorry." I patted her turned head, which made her tense her face as she forced herself to keep from smiling.

"How was shopping Mom, Lady Tabitha? Did you guys buy a lot of stuff?" I asked, my hand still on my sister's head.

"We didn't buy much, just a couple of new outfits for Ellie and Lilia," my mother responded.

At this time, I heard a storm of footsteps coming toward us. Vincent arrived beside us with an excited look on his face. His eyes were a little red and he had an uncontrollable smile on his face.

"You guys are finally here!" He said picking up his daughter and kissing her cheek.

"Honey, why are you so flustered? Have you been crying? "What is going on?" Tabitha had a bewildered look on her face from confusion and worry. Vince did look a little crazy right now.

"You didn't tell them yet, Arthur?" He faced me, the goofy smile still pasted on his face.

Shaking my head, I chuckled, "I just got down as well. I was about to tell them."

"Tell us what, baby?" My mother had a look of concern as well. Mothers never liked not knowing what was going on.

"I discussed with Mr. Vincent about teaching Ellie and Lilia mana manipulation starting today. Of course, only if Lady Tabitha was okay with it."

"..."

Tabitha just shook her head, looking at her husband. "W-wait, hold on. Is this some sort of prank? If it is, it's not funny."

"No ma'am. I know both you and Sir Vincent aren't mages but it is possible for Lilia to become one." I gave her a sincere look.

“N-no way. I’ve never heard of a method for teaching someone mana manipulation. I’ve been taught that it’s up to the child’s innate talent to awaken by herself. Why haven’t I heard anyone else teaching kids then?”

Tabitha had a lot harder time believing that Lilia could become a mage than her husband. I didn’t blame her though. Vincent didn’t even question me, which was surprising. The biggest worry for a mother from a noble family was the future of her children and in a society where mages are the elites, the Helstea’s lineage, no matter how rich they were, would get more than a few looks of pity.

“I’ve never heard of anything like teaching a child mana manipulation either, Art. How do you plan on doing this?” my mother quizzed.

“Mom, you guys all know how I awakened at the age of 3 right? I still remember what happened and why it did. I’m going to do what I did on myself to them. I’ll have to test them before I can even start but for Ellie, I’m 100% sure she’ll be able to awaken and for Lilia, around 70%,” I answered. The probability was higher than what I said for Lilia but I didn’t want to get their hopes up too much. There was still a chance she wouldn’t be able to awaken.

“Heavens. T-this is. Give me a minute. I need to sit down.” I noticed Tabitha’s knees were wobbling as she made her way to the couch.

“This isn’t going to be an instant thing. It’ll take a few years for them to awaken on their own after I teach them.”

The Helstea parents just nodded at this and I turned to face the confused Lilia and Ellie.

“Ellie, Lilia, can you guys sit down on the floor over by the fireplace?” I instructed, guiding them into the living room. “I want you guys to sit in your most comfortable position, back to back. Leave some space so I can sit in between.”

Ellie was still a little clueless as to what was going on, but Lilia had gotten the gist of what was happening and I could see the determined look on her face. Ellie sat down with her legs stuck out in front of her while Lilia sat in a more ladylike position with both her legs tucked in to her left side.

“Okay. Before I do anything, I want you guys to close your eyes and concentrate. If you try really hard, you’ll be able to see some spots of light. Do you see it?” I placed myself between them now as Tabitha, Vincent, and my mother were all staring intently.

“...”

“N-no... I don’t really see anything,” I heard a murmur from Lilia. I expected much but I turned to see everyone having looks of panic on them. Ignoring them, I turned to face my sister and asked her the same thing. I was less afraid of her seeing the light, but not recognizing what to actually spot.

Thankfully, she responded, “Bruhder, I think I see a small pretty light!”

The next step involved doing something that only I was capable of doing. I had to will mana of all four elemental attributes at once into their bodies. Doing this, they would be able to see a lot more clearly the specks of mana that were scattered in their body.

“Okay I’m going to start now. You guys will feel a little feverish but I want you guys to endure it and just focus on the specks of light.” As soon as I said that, I willed my quadra elemental mana into them.

The reason that all four elements had to be exerted unto them was because the mana that had yet to gather and form a mana core was at its purest form, meaning that all four elements needed to be exerted at the same power into their bodies to trigger any sort of responses from the dormant mana inside them.

“Eep!” “Hng!” Lilia and Ellie yelped out a little in surprise.

“I-I think I see some of the lights! They’re so pretty!” exclaimed Lilia.

“Wow! So many!” Echoed my little sister.

“Okay, this part is important, I’m going to help you guys with this part but your job is to try and connect all of the little lights okay? Do you get that Ellie? Pretend that all of the little lights are friends and they need to meet together. Can you do that for me, Ellie?” This was the trickiest and longest part and I had to make sure that they understood what to do.

“O-okay! I think I get it!” “The lights are friends? Okay!”

I remained in my position for over an hour to trigger the dormant mana in their body, at least to the point that they would be visible enough for them to manipulate and gather.

Taking a deep breath, I removed my hands from their back, instructing them to continue gathering the little lights until the lights disappear.

“How is it? D-do you think Lilia will be able to become a mage?” Both the Helstea parents are a mess. They had anxious looks on their faces while Vincent was nervously chewing on a fingernail. I looked at my mother and even she had a hint of uneasiness in her eyes.

I responded with a wide smile. “Don’t worry, both Lilia and my little sister should awaken as a mage within a few years. My plan was to do this with them every day for the few months that I’ll be home. By then, they should be capable of training on their own to form a mana cor...”

Tabitha didn’t even let me finish as picked me up into a big hug. “Oh thank you thank you thank you. My baby will be able to learn magic! Oh my goodness I was so worried what her future would be since both of us aren’t mages. *Sniff* Uuu... thank you so much, Arthur.”

Vincent’s face was streaming tears as he kept his gaze on his daughter meditating. My mother patted my head silently, giving me a proud smile.

It wasn’t as big of a deal for Ellie to become a mage since our whole family could use magic. The chances of her never awakening would have been slim to none even if I didn’t do anything; I was just speeding up the process. I had figured the faster she learns magic, the faster she would be able to protect herself.

The two girls lasted a couple of hours before the mana I exerted dispersed out of their body. Surprisingly, Lilia actually lasted longer than Ellie. She definitely had more willpower than my four-year-old sister.

My father came a bit after from the Guild Hall and was ecstatic for the Helstea family that they were going to have their first mage in the family.

Picking up Eleanor and rubbing his beard on her cheek, my father just cooed, "Aww, my little baby is going to be strong like her older brother! Promise me you won't be stronger than father, okay? Or he'll be very sad."

My mother just laughed at this while my sister just giggled, pushing Father's face away. "Papa! Your beard tickles! St~op, hehe!"

We had a great dinner party that night. Vincent and Tabitha went all out on the delicacies leaving my mouth watering and Sylv drooling right next to me. We ended the night with everyone merry, Vincent going around offering drinks to even the maids and butlers.

The following days had consisted of condensing my mana core and my elemental skills along with my dragon will's powers. This was a mind-numbingly slow process and I felt myself stagnating because of the lack of stimulation.

I spent a few days out of the week sparring with Father but I could tell he was afraid of hurting me, always holding back even when it was unnecessary.

Besides my training, I spent a couple of hours everyday watching over my sister and Lilia while they continued their journey to form their cores. It was a strenuous process and I could see my sister being a bit more impatient with the training but I did my best to help her through it by making games out of it.

During this time, I got to talk to my mother about her abilities as an Emitter. I asked how she was able to learn it and train it when there were so few Emitters and she smiled at me mysteriously, saying how a woman needed to have a few secrets of her own.

I guess I would have to ask her again when she was feeling less secretive.

Two weeks before my birthday and the start of my career as an Adventurer, I was startled by loud, obnoxious knocks on the front door. Opening the door, the faces of the all too familiar group made my lips curl up.

The Beginning After The End – Chapter 23: Royalty

REYNOLDS LEYWIN'S POV:

As I absentmindedly took a sip from my cup of coffee, a scalding sensation startled me out of my daze. Vince and I were seated around the small table on the outside patio as we discussed some business plans on the Helstea Auction House. The topic had shifted towards the security parameters and how we were currently approaching the stages where it was necessary to completely restructure and enhance the guard teams.

Alongside capable nonmage adventurers, we had recently managed to recruit a few long range augmenters, making up an extremely powerful addition to the security. While it was still widely prevalent for augmenters to go the melee route due to functionality and ease, ranged augmenters, like archers and crossbowmen, continued to be a much more powerful asset in defensive settings. Vince poked at me a few times whether conjurers should be employed for the upcoming event.

“Hmmm...I know how beneficial it'd be to have conjurers that could set up barriers and help support the augmenters, but I'm against it.” I took another, more careful sip from my cup.

“You mind elaborating? You just said how helpful it'd be to have them,” he rebutted as he rhythmically stirred his tea.

Setting down my cup, I replied, “If we're just talking about firepower, I'd be all for it, but you know it's not as simple as that, Vince. It would affect team morale having even a few conjurers in a team of augmenters. You know yourself how snobby most conjurers can get. I swear they think they're angel incarnates; most of them think of augmenters as some sort of primitive beasts for using their hands to fight. Even if we do manage to find a few that aren't so rotten, the team would start thinking we're hiring conjurers because I don't trust them.”

Vince's gaze was focused blankly on a stained smudge on the table; it was obvious what he was thinking. “You have a point. I left you completely in charge of the security aspects, so we'll go with what you say, but we need to be absolutely sure the 10th Anniversary Helstea Auction goes well. Even the Royal Family will be there this time. We can't let any commotions get too big.”

I simply nodded in agreement, giving my friend an appreciative smile.

“Oh right! We need to take your son with us to the Tenth Anniversary Auction. He had mentioned he wanted a sword, right? I didn't know you had taught him how to use the sword. I expected the boy to take after you on the infighting style you're so good at with your gauntlets.”

“Sigh. I never taught him how to use the sword, Vince. He's already had a grasp of sword fighting since he was four years old,” I let out, disbelieving the words that came out of my own mouth.

“You can't be serious... Lilia was still scared to go down the stairs by herself when she was four,” a bewildered Vince sputtered.

I continued, “He apparently learned by watching me train and reading books on swords. Vince, that's not even the part I care about. It's when we spar, though. His gaze when we practice, his reactions and fighting style. I don't feel like I'm sparring with my eight-year-old son. It feels like I'm fighting some veteran sword master. The only reason I can handle him right now is because his body is still immature, but the way he reacts to my moves...it's something that only comes with decades of experience in life-or-death fighting.”

“Mmm...I can't say I don't know what you're talking about. I sometimes find myself wondering if your son is actually only eight. Are you scared of him, Rey?” he asked seriously.

“No. That's one thing I've become more and more sure of. No matter what, he's still my son. I know he cares deeply about his family, too and that's all I could ask for as his father.”

ARTHUR LEYWIN'S POV:

During these past two months, it was evident that there had been progress in Lilia's and my sister's mana manipulation. It was no longer necessary to infuse my mana into them anymore, so they were able to train by themselves now. Of course, it would still take a few years for them to form a mana core—especially Ellie and her short attention span—but I did drill into the both of them the importance of keeping their training a secret.

I didn't need to remind my parents and the Helstea family that keeping this a secret was important, but it was blatantly obvious that the four of them were excited for the day Lilia and Ellie would awaken.

Sylvie had been sleeping much more these past two months, but there were changes that became noticeable. For one, her intelligence was rapidly increasing. Her thoughts to me were more intricate and contained complicated emotions that went past just 'hungry' or 'sleepy.' In the few short months after she was born, it felt like she had gained years of emotional intelligence.

One major change had happened recently; she learned how to transform.

Okay, it wasn't really something as drastic as transformation, but she was able to manipulate her body a little. It felt like it happened so suddenly. I had been pondering how to hide her appearance in the days to come when she grows larger. She had been beside me when she started whining and scratching herself as if uncomfortable. The next thing I knew, her red spikes began retracting while her horns got smaller. It was a mind-blowing surprise. Now, most of the time, Sylvie just kept her spikes and horns retracted, making her look more like a cute, black scaled fox with little horns.

Throughout this time, both Vincent and Tabitha had insisted on giving me more gifts as thanks. Even if I wasn't able to acquire the cloak or mask, I had been planning on training Lilia. After all, she's part of the family that helped my family, so as far as I was concerned, there was nothing to lose in helping them. After numerous refusals, we had finally settled on something they could get me: a sword.

My body had finally grown big enough to properly handle a small sword without awkwardly toppling over at the slightest mishap. It wouldn't be bigger than an adult-sized dagger, but it finally allowed me to train my swordsmanship with something other than a wooden stick. We had decided to make it a family event and have both my family and Vincent's family go visit the Tenth Anniversary Helstea Auction.

Waiting in the living room downstairs for my father and Vince to get ready, I heard an obnoxious knock from the front door.

Sheesh, knocking once is plenty.

I let out a slightly annoyed shout that I'd get it since I was close by, anyway. No need to trouble the maids when I was right next to door.

"Who's ther—OOF!"

I was hit with the nostalgic sensation of getting smothered by a pair of foam pillows. A classic way of assassination, but shouldn't it be used while I'm sleeping?

"Oh my goodness! You were alive! Look how big you've gotten! I'm so sorry, Art! I wasn't able to protect you! I'm so glad!" the lady sniffled.

"Mmfph! Mmmfph!"

"Angela, I don't think he can breathe..." A comforting voice pointed out.

"Eep! S-Sorry!" Angela squealed.

Peeling my face away, I smiled at the sight of my companions. "It's so good seeing you guys again!"

My giant guardian angel, Durden, patted my head and I saw his narrow eyes getting watery, triggering a tear from me as well.

Adam smacked me on the b**t. "Little brat! You know how devastated everyone was because of what happened? It's good to see you again, hehe."

"You've gotten better-looking, Arthur." I turned to see the charismatic Helen Shard with her signature bow still strapped to her back squat down in front of me. She lightly pinched my cheek and gave me a sympathetic smile before standing back up.

Suddenly, I'm embraced again, but this time, I was thoroughly surprised. "Sniff."

It was Jasmine. That cold, aloof Jasmine. She kept mute as she just tightened her arms around me, letting out soft sniffles.

I couldn't resist the urge to pet her head when she suddenly peeled herself away from me, her face scarlet. Quickly standing up and trying to regain composure, she shot me an embarrassed nod and turned away.

At this time, Sylvie woke up from her nap on the couch and trotted towards us.

"Woah! What is that?" Adam exclaimed. The rest of the Twin Horns had the same expression of surprise as even Jasmine turned back to look at the mysterious mana beast.

"She's my contracted beast, Sylvie," I announced while my bond hopped on top of my head.

"Holy c**p! You already have a contracted beast? Do you know how valuable it is to have a bond? Oh man, I've been trying to look for a beast to tame these past few years but with no luck. The ones that they sell are way too expensive, too, lucky brat!" Adam was practically pulling his hair out in jealousy.

"Bonds," or "contracted beasts" for the official term, were highly sought after by both types of mages. It was a bit more advantageous for conjurers since, while the master prepared spells, the bond would be able to protect them. However, it was also very useful for augmenters as well, who often sought after beasts to contract them as mounts or a partner to have their back.

"What's with all the commotion down...Ah! You guys are here!" My father, wearing his uniform, leaped down the flight of stairs and rushed toward his ex-party members.

He was giving all of them a hug as my mother and sister came down soon after.

"Everyone! It's so good seeing you guys again!" my mother exclaimed. She didn't have the chance to say anything more as the girls all threw themselves at her and start drooling over my baby sister, both of whom were dressed very nicely for the event. My parents hadn't seen the Twin Horns for almost as long as me, so everyone was just as excited.

"Oh my goodness! Alice, Ellie looks just like you! She's going to grow up to be so pretty!"

"...Cute."

"Rey is going to have his hands full soon with potential candidates kukuku. Can you tell me how old you are?"

“Four!”

The girls were a jumble of excitement and estrogen as they ogled Ellie.

Vincent came down soon after with Tabitha and Lilia. The mother and father duo were matching in a black suit and dress while Lilia was sporting a flowery dress under a warm cloak. After everyone introduced each other, it was decided that the Twin Horns would come with us to the Helstea Auction House for the Tenth Anniversary event. On the way there, I filled them in on what had happened after the fall. My dad explained to them the basics in his letter, but they were dying to know the details. They were quite shocked when they learned I was in the Kingdom of Elenoir for over four years.

The ride was pretty short, so I wasn't able to finish telling them everything before we got off.

The first thought that had come to mind upon arrival was that Vincent really put in a lot of work into this. The Helstea Auction House was breathtaking. It was rather misleading to even call it a house as it towered high above any of the other buildings nearby. I've been to many national and historical monuments that were created by the most famous architects, but this was on a different level. I suspected that they had a lot of help from Conjurers from how large it was. The Auction House was a magnificent theatre with intricate designs all over. The main doors were over 4 meters in height and were made from petrified wood with carved designs on it. Compared to the naturalistic and elegant designs that I saw in the Elf Kingdom, this was more complicated and grand. It was in the shape of a half-cylinder with detailed stone sculptures of different weapons as supports.

We arrived early, so only the workers and guards were present, preparing for the event. The inside was equally, if not more stunning. The front door opened to a path that stretched out to a stage on the other end. To our left and right, there were rows of escalating seats made from a rather luxurious burgundy leather that could fit over ten thousand people comfortably. Upon looking up, I noticed that there were incased booths at the very top of the rows of seats and even higher, there was a single room attached to the ceiling and back wall with glass surrounding it, giving a clear view of the stage. It was easy to guess that those booths, as well as the single room, was for the VIP.

Turns out, that VIP room on the ceiling was the room we'd be seated in. Father and the Twin Horns, who had decided to help my father and the guards to prepare for any unwanted commotions or outbreaks, were the first to separate from us. Vincent separated from us after as he barked out orders at the workers and readied the hosts to greet the more important guests.

Tabitha led us to the room, making us comfortable inside the carefully-designed and furnished area that was meant for only the most distinguished and wealthy guests. There was a wine rack and a few reclining seats and tables with closer seats by the window. I made myself comfortable on a seat closest to the window.

The auction house was soon a panorama of cheerful and excited noise, as more and more people, who were no doubt people of some sort of influence, began filling the lower seats. There were some groups that seemed more distinguished than the rest who were personally escorted by the hosts to their booths. No doubt, they were some of the more affluent nobles in the Kingdom.

Growing bored of the hordes of overdressed nobles chatting eagerly amongst themselves, I shifted my attention to Lilia as she was teaching some sort of clapping game to Ellie. I couldn't help but smile

myself as the both of them broke into a fit of giggles when either of them messed up and were flicked gently in the ear as punishment.

Time passed by rather slowly until Vincent came back, leading a group of unfamiliar people inside.

The first to come in behind Vincent was an elderly man with long, deep-red hair that was aged with streaks of grey. His back was ramrod straight with broad shoulders that took off years in his appearance. The man's eyes were stern with harsh, sword-shaped eyebrows, giving him an undeniably eye-catching presence. He was wearing a red robe lined with white fur around the collar and had a cane that shined brighter than any silver I had previously seen. Trailing closely behind him was a lady that looked a few years older than my mother. While my mother had a lovely, sweet, friendly ambience, this lady's facial features reminded me of an ice sculpture; refined, elegant, noble and of no flaws, but also cold and devoid of emotion. She was wearing a shimmering silvery-white dress that complimented her dark blue hair that draped over her shoulders like a well-kept tapestry.

Behind the lady of whom I assumed was the man's wife were two younger kids that could only be their kin. The older child, a boy that looked to be about the age of thirteen or so, took more after his father. With his serious brown eyes, straight brows, and his short mahogany hair that had a shiny luster just like his father's, it was apparent as to what he would look like a few decades down the road. Despite his fierce looks, however, there was a sort of unrefined charisma that was different from his father's. It was the sort of charisma that would make him the center of any group.

The younger one, a girl that looked to be about my age, surveyed the room carefully before locking eyes with me.

It would still be a couple of years until she started maturing, but needless to say, the potential was there. I couldn't help comparing her to Tess. They would both grow to be captivating to the men around them, but in very different ways. Tess was the lovely girl next door, with her comforting almond-shaped eyes that glowed a bright teal. Her peaches and cream complexion and rosy cheeks. Her unique, gunmetal hair complimented her eyes, giving her a mysterious, yet approachable aura.

No, this girl was the complete opposite. Her porcelain white complexion was a canvas for her meticulously carved facial features. Her penetratingly sharp eyes that seemed much too mature for her age was a dark brown shade that appeared larger because of her long, thick lashes. Her hair was a glaring black, which she got from her mother. Compared to her dark hair and eyes, however, her small lips were covered in a soft pink shade that gave life to her doll-like appearance.

It was hard not to wonder how they would grow up to be; whether mother nature would make them bloom or wither.

Peeling my eyes off of the girl in front of me, I focused on the three guards that followed after the picturesque family.

"I didn't know we would be in here with guests, Vincent," the man said, neither harshly nor kindly.

"I apologize, Your Majesty! I assumed you wouldn't mind having a few other people with you. You remember my wife, Tabitha, right? Well, these are our close family friends," he introduced, waving his arm in our direction.

After regarding us for a moment, his lips curled up into a smile. "If they are your friends, Vincent, then they are mine as well."

"It's a pleasure to meet you. At least we'll have some company besides these guards," the lady giggled.

I raised an eyebrow in surprise at the sharp contrast in the woman's personality to her appearance. She seemed much more welcoming, despite her intimidating looks, than her husband.

"Everyone, as you all may know, I'd like you all to meet the King and Queen of Sapin. Introduce yourselves to King Blaine Glayder and Queen Priscilla Glayder and their children, Curtis and Kathyln."

At this, my mother—who was holding my sister—Tabitha, and even Lilia, dropped down, genuflecting. I caught on and lowered myself a moment later as well.

Giving us a nod, the King gestured for us to stand. "No more of this, now. No need to be stiff, we're just here for the auction, after all."

As I got back up, Sylvie peeked her head out from under my robe where she was sleeping, surveying curiously the new faces.

"Kuu?" she chirped, tilting her head.

I thought I heard a gasp from one of the guards in the rear, but I wasn't able to tell since their faces were covered.

"Oh my! What a cute little mana beast!" Queen Priscilla's face brightened up at the sight as she made her way towards me.

The King and the two children's eyes looked towards my direction as well.

The guards took a step forward as well, making sure they were close enough to react in case something happened to the Queen.

"She just hatched a few months ago. Her name is Sylvie. Come out and say hello," I responded.

"Kyu~!" she cooed while hopping out of my robe and stretching her body like a cat.

"I assume this little mana beast is your bond, young man?" The King came closer, kneeling down to get a closer view of Sylvie.

I just gave a wordless nod. It should be fine with Sylv's appearance the way it is. "How fortunate you are to have a mana beast. Even infant ones are not easy to tame, yet she looks to be very obedient."

"Well we're able to communicate mentally, so it's more like a mutual agreement rather than obedience," I simply shrugged.

"What? You mean to say that you are under an Equals Contract?"

We all turned our heads to face the source of the voice. It was one of the hooded guards behind the children.

D**n, did I say something I wasn't supposed to?

“Umm, I’m not sure what that is, but she was the one that initiated the contract, so I think so?” I shrugged, hoping to switch topic.

Was it that big of a deal who formed the contract?

“Let me take a closer look at your bond!” the hooded guard exclaimed, creeping closer to us.

Before I could decline, the King stepped in.

“This isn’t the time nor place to study someone else’s pet. You’re being rude, Sebastian.” His gaze turned harsh as he rebuked him.

“My apologies...” he said, hoping I’d complete the sentence.

“Arthur. Arthur Leywin,” I finished, giving a curt bow. As he and his wife gave me a small smile, we took our seats in time to hear the clear voice declaring that the auction would start soon.

A cold shiver made me turn back just to see Sebastian, who had taken off his hood, staring intently at Sylvie, who was nestled on my lap.

The Beginning After The End – Chapter 24: Auction

“Ladies and Gentlemen! May I say that it is of the highest honor for me to be here tonight? All of you are gathered here today for one reason and one reason only, I presume? It is to have the chance to obtain rare and valuable items in this auction!”

Applause thundered in enthusiasm at the old gentleman’s ardent introduction.

“If everyone in the audience would now kindly turn to face the back room at the very top, we have a few exceedingly important figures that have decided to bless us with their presence. Please join me in welcoming the King and Queen of Sapin!” The auctioneer was the first to flick out the tail of his suit and genuflect. The audience immediately followed suit, lowering themselves respectfully in a bow since they couldn’t kneel in their seats.

The King and Queen, in response, stepped out towards the window in front of me and waved their arms slowly in a practiced motion.

“Next, the one that made this whole event possible. Please give a big round of applause for Vincent Helstea!”

The auctioneer’s introduction was followed by another round of applause as Vincent stepped up next to the King and Queen, giving a deep bow in return.

I remained seated, looking down below at the crowds of people who were supposed to be of much higher class than me, but I couldn’t help but look at them as if they were...

No... I shouldn’t think like that. I’m not a king anymore. Hell, I haven’t even gone through puberty yet. No point in acting like someone who didn’t exist anymore.

I turned my gaze toward the King and Queen, studying them. Despite the stoic expression the King always carried, he didn’t have a domineering demeanor. He had a charismatic and strong presence, making it easy to believe that a majority of the citizens of Sapin would respect him, but that was it. He

didn't earn his seat; his father had given it to him. The Glayder family had been the Royal Family since the founding of Sapin. I wasn't surprised to see that King Glayder's mana core was only at the red stage.

Turning my gaze over to the Queen, something caught my eyes that I didn't really notice at first. Strapped to the backside of her dress was a white wand. I couldn't sense her mana, which meant she was either carrying an artifact that could hide it or she was at a level high enough where I couldn't sense it.

Queen Priscilla caught me observing her and gave me a discerning smile, revealing her pearl white teeth. Her smile threw me off-guard, making me flinch and quickly turn away. I could feel how hot my face was, making it all the more embarrassing. The word beautiful wouldn't do justice as a means of describing her. However, one thing I had noticed ever since coming to this world was the fact that I lacked any sort of sexual attraction towards these older women. At first, I had thought that it might've been due of the lack of necessary hormones currently in this prepubescent body, but the more I thought about it, I felt like it boiled down to the fact that my mother was just a bit younger than I had been before being reborn into this world.

I had never really been interested in human psychology but it was interesting noticing that women associated with the same age group as my parental guardian made them unappealing sexually. Maybe that was just me; no way to tell.

Of course, that also didn't mean I'd go for children my age like Tess, Lilia, or even this ice princess here. They could be the very personification of beauty itself, but it didn't change the fact that their mental level was that of a child. This was the reason I wasn't able to see Tess as anything other than a friend or a sister to me, even when she was so obvious in showing her attraction towards me. Maybe when she's older and more mature, I would start thinking about it.

Sigh. Being popular sure was a hassle.

"...kuu." I looked down to see Sylvie staring at me cynically, her eye half-open, judging eye seeming to say 'are you serious?'

"Haha..." I couldn't help but laugh in embarrassment as I pushed Sylvie's face in a different direction to redirect her hurtful stare with my hands to block her hurtful gaze.

A large hand lightly squeezed my shoulder. "Arthur, a sword is up for auction right now. Tell me if you want it so I can put in my bid. Don't worry about the price either! Perks of being the owner of this place," Vincent whispered.

"Thank you." I turned my attention to the item being auctioned off.

"This short sword was forged by a master smith who is also a fire artificer, ensuring that the quality during the forging process is top class. The core of this weapon is made from the core of a Thunder Hawk mana beast. Reinforcing this sword with just a little mana will produce currents of electricity around the edge of the blade, enhancing its cutting power and even having a mild paralyzing effect! The bid will start at fifty gold!"

Excited cries erupted immediately as nearly every noble boy who sought to become a mage tugged at their parent's sleeves, begging them to bid. I remained motionless, my head propped up on my arm as I

inadvertently let out a yawn. There was a large screen that magnified the items so the audience in the back was able to see. However, while the little shock ability could be handy, it was obvious that the sword itself was subpar at best compared to the blade I had wielded in my previous life.

Vincent had been constantly shifting his gaze between me and the weapon, hoping I would at least be interested in the weapon that most people would kill over.

I shook my head in response.

“No worries! That was just the start! Let me know when you find something you like. Oh! I almost forgot. I have the items you wanted in the back. I’ll have one of the workers deliver it to me after this event is over,” he whispered, leaning closely to so only I could hear.

My ears perked up as I abruptly turned to him. “You managed to find a voice-altering mask as well?”

“It took a bit longer than I expected but I finally managed to find one. I also got you a coat made from a nightmare fox that should make it harder for the wearer to be registered to the unsuspecting eye. I thought it would be something you would want so I snatched that too while I could,” Vincent replied softly, shooting me a wink.

“That’s more than what I had hoped for.” The mask was essential for me to become an adventurer, but the coat would no doubt be useful as well.

“Don’t worry about it and just stay safe. I’m the one that has to deal with your family if something happens to you, you know,” he chuckled.

I just smiled wryly at this fact. No. I wasn’t going to give my family a reason to grieve again like I had done to them before.

There were a few interesting items along the way. There were several beast cores, most of which were B-class or lower. The prices for those were astronomical. Even a C-class core was around fifty gold, and each class multiplied this figure exponentially. There were a few more artifacts and cores but none of those were things I wanted.

The King himself bid on a few of them, winning an A-class beast core. It wasn’t until a mage actually absorbed the core that they would find whether a beast core still contained a will or not. Chances were slim to find a core that still had its will still intact; even if it did contain the will, it had to be compatible with the user. Most beasts, however, had already passed it on to one of its offspring or instinctively chose to disperse their will before dying.

I guess the King was hoping to get lucky. The Queen, on the other hand, bid on a mana absorption ring and a couple other items useful for conjurers.

As we approached the latter half of the auction, the items began increasing in value. As more and more items were sold off, my interest started to deplete until a large, square container, covered by a sheet, was rolled out onto the stage by a few workers.

I couldn’t help but grow agitated as the auctioneer removed the sheet, revealing a cage full of females chained together with only a dirty sack to cover their private areas.

It disgusted me as so many noblemen frantically began bidding on the young female slaves that were soon stripped to show their assets like animals. I realized that being born in a small town with people who disagreed with the idea of having slaves had made me almost forget the fact that slaves actually existed in this world.

My world abolished slavery hundreds of years ago, so the idea of owning a slave was something that I just couldn't get used to.

Memories of killing the slave traders that had abducted Tessia came back to mind. If I hadn't been there to rescue her, what would've happened? A shiver ran down my spine at the thought of Tessia being abused by a corrupt aristocrat. Now that I think about it, didn't I inadvertently prevent a war from happening between the humans and elves?

The taste of metal in my mouth brought me back to reality. Realizing that I had bit down too hard on my lower lip, I quickly wiped the blood off of my lips with my finger.

Tabitha and my mother had solemn faces at the sight of the slaves, but they simply shook their heads and focused their attention on Ellie and Lilia instead. Even though the Helstea family was a very prominent noble house, they opposed the idea of keeping slaves and opted to simply hire maids and butlers.

Vincent's face flashed with guilt but he quickly regained composure. I'm sure he was against this, but it couldn't be helped that the popularity and demand of slaves were too high.

Turning my head, I spotted the prince murmuring something to the little princess, but I couldn't guess what from her expressionless face.

This was becoming tedious. I was beginning to think that it would be better to hold off on getting a decent sword for now and just settle for a decent practice sword until my body matured a bit.

Getting up from my seat, I leaned back, stretching my stiff body when I spotted the hooded guard named Sebastian eyeing Sylvie with a disturbing twinkle in his eyes.

The beady-eyed, bony conjurer underneath that hood continued impatiently fiddling with his metal staff as his eyes stayed greedily fixated on my bond.

After a few moments, he noticed that I was glaring back at him. Letting out a stifled cough in response, he straightened his robe as he spread out his normally hunched shoulders to make himself look bigger. Staring down at me, he had the audacity to let out a smug grin, as if he had every right to do what he was going to do.

This foolish plebeian has the audacity to...

VINCENT HELSTEA'S POV:

It was a pity Arthur wasn't able to find a suitable sword.

No matter. There are enough swords in storage; I'm sure he will take a liking to at least one of them.

"Your Majesty, I hope you're finding it worthwhile to visit this humble auction house of ours," I assured, lowering myself.

“This place and event was anything but humble, Vincent. And yes, I’m not sure how you managed to secure an A-class beast core from a silvercoat bear, but you’ve managed to build quite the network. Let’s just hope that the beast will is still intact.” He clasped my back excitedly with his hand.

“Don’t get your hopes up too much, Dear. You know how rare it is,” I could hear the Queen mutter quietly in response.

The Queen turned back to resume her conversation with Alice and my wife. They seemed to be discussing something about the kids.

His Majesty and I turned our attention back to the main stage when, all of a sudden, a terrifyingly oppressive presence filled the room, constricting my body.

I tried my hardest to move, to try and find the source of this domineering bloodlust, but my body refused to obey.

What the hell was going on? This was the most secure area in the entire building with the King’s guard inside, as well as my own, securing the outside of the room.

My breathing turned shallow as the overbearing pressure continued gripping at my insides.

I could feel beads of cold sweat slowly rolling down my face as if they, too, were afraid.

With much effort, my body relented a little and I was able to turn my gaze slightly to see if they knew what was going on.

While they were at least able to move their bodies, it was clear that they were just as confused as I was.

I had no idea what to expect next. I had assumed that I would live for quite a bit longer, yet here I was, at death’s door, trying to struggle out of his icy grasp.

What in Hell’s name was happening?

ARTHUR LEYWIN’S POV:

D**n it. I lost control.

I quickly turned away from the pale-faced Sebastian currently shaking on the floor, hoping no one had noticed.

I had only meant to give Sebastian a little scare, not to terrify every person in the room.

Taking a quick peek around, I let out a small sigh of relief after seeing that my mother and sister were okay. My sister was startled and crying, but they were both far away enough to not get directly affected.

I didn’t think it would be this bad with this body of mine.

This was the first time letting my killing intent loose. Even when I was up against the slave traders, I had chosen not to emit any kind of intent in order to catch them by surprise.

The King’s augments guards had their weapons unsheathed and positioned to defend around the royal family by the time I had withdrawn the pressure I had exerted onto the room.

“Who’s there? You dare try and attack the royal family?” the King roared as he pushed his wife and children behind him. Queen Priscilla had her wand out and was silently muttering a spell as she herded her frightened children, as well as my mother and my sister, Ellie, behind her husband and the guards.

Vincent used an artifact in his hands to call for more guards inside and had the others scout the area for any assassins that may be, or had been, nearby.

Time ticked slowly for me as everyone in the room was in a state of panic and tension. My mother had grabbed me, holding firmly onto me and my sister as guards ran around with weapons held close.

My father had stopped by, but, after making sure that we were okay, left to try and search for the mysterious attacker.

It wasn’t until they confirmed killing an intruder on the roof of the auction house that everyone had calmed down.

I let out sigh of relief, but unlike everyone else, my relief wasn’t for the fact that the intruder had been killed, but the fact that I had been provided with a convenient scapegoat.

Thank you, intruder on the roof. Your sacrifice was not in vain.

“Oy Sebastian. How could a royal guard fall on his a**e by a little intimidation from an intruder? You’re going to die early like this.” A hooded augmenter holding a spear shook his head, trying to sound tough in front of his comrades.

“I merely slipped!” Sebastian snarled, slapping away the hand that one of the guards held out.

He regarded me suspiciously for a moment but said nothing else as he turned away in disdain.

“Now! For the final item we have up for the lucky individual fortunate enough to acquire this!” The auctioneer’s dramatic voice echoed from below as another cage covered by a silky cloth was dragged onstage.

Everyone in the room was still noticeably tense from the initial shock of an intruder, but their attention was now focused back onto the stage after Vincent announced he had been killed.

After a dramatic pause, the tarp covering the cage was removed, revealing a small feline animal the size of a large dog.

The auctioneer bellowed at that exact moment, “An infant world lion! For those who are ignorant of this magnificent mana beast, an adult world lion has the capability to at least become a B-class mana beast. I dare say that if taken care of well, this infant world lion could even become an A-class mana beast! Do you know what this means? Taking care of and treasuring this fine beast will allow its master to become a legendary beast tamer!”

The audience below us erupted into a frenzy as hands shot into the air, bidding without even waiting for the auctioneer. To my surprise, King Glayder smacked the glass with his hand as his eyes stayed glued to the mana beast.

Having never traversed to the Beast Glades, I was intrigued by cub as well.

Sebastian walked over to the edge of the room as well to get a better view of the mana beast currently on display. However, he merely let out a dissatisfied snort before walking back, getting another greedy eyeful of Sylvie.

I normally wouldn't have minded someone becoming jealous of the fact that I had a bond, but it was obvious that Sebastian had intentions to try and take my bond away from me. Needless to say, my patience with his borderline perverted leering was growing increasingly thin.

"Now, now! I won't be able to start the bidding until everyone gets settled!" The auctioneer shook his fingers with a satisfied grin plastered on his face as he waited for the crowd to sedate.

As the bidders all reluctantly settled, the auctioneer finally announced the starting bid. "We will start at one hundred gold!"

Back in Ashber, ten silver coins were more than enough to feed a family of four for a year. Of course, there were obviously luxury foods that totaled astronomical amounts, but simply by going off of that standard, one hundred silver coins, which amounted to a single gold coin, would be more than enough to feed a family of four for ten years.

Growing up in the humble outpost of a town, I had never realized how much money was truly spent by the affluent class.

Immediately, the price for the world lion soared. Soon, it passed four hundred gold and the bidders had no intention of stopping.

"500 gold!"

"550!"

"600!"

"700!"

"1000 gold coins!" the King bellowed into a voice-amplifying artifact.

Simply by hearing their king's voice, the crowd's incessant bidding stopped. It was obvious that, while there were plenty who could afford to bid higher, they were more debating on whether it was worth bidding against their own king.

It didn't seem fair once the King stepped in, but he at least had the decency to put up a high enough price.

After the auctioneer counted off, the price was eventually settled at a thousand gold coins or one white-gold tablet; something I'd only seen in books and pictures.

Vincent walked up to the King with his hand held out. "Seems like no one wants to bid against you, King Glayder," he congratulated.

"One white-gold tablet shouldn't be too unfair, right?" the King joked as he peered back down onto the stage, obviously excited.

“Thank you for the consideration,” Vincent chuckled in defeat. “What are your plans with the new royal pet? Will you use it for yourself, or perhaps give it to your son?”

“While tempting it is for me to acquire a bond, I’m thinking of giving it to Curtis...” he said casually. “Of course, that all depends on how he does,” he finished, patting his son’s head.

“D-Dad!” Prince Curtis, whose face had visibly brightened at his father’s first remark, stuttered out in worry.

Queen Priscilla, adding fuel to the fire, added, “Curtis, I remember you’ve been slacking off on your sword lessons.”

“Ah! Mom! That was supposed to be a secret!” The fierce-looking prince tugged on his mother’s sleeve as his eyes switched between his mother and father.

“Mama, can I have a pet?” Ellie asked.

“Haha! I don’t know. Mana beasts only want to be pets for nice ladies,” my mom teased.

“Ellie is nice! Right, Brother?” She pulled on my sleeve, sending me out to battle on her behalf.

“Hmm? Who knows.” Shooting her an evil smile, I placed Sylvie on my sister’s lap before she started crying.

The Tenth Anniversary event ended without any further commotion besides the one that I caused, and the guards escorted all of us back downstairs.

Upon reaching the storage room behind the stage, Vincent handed me a package wrapped in a black cloth. The items that the King purchased were being hauled to the carriage by some of the workers.

“Thank you.” I accepted it graciously.

“For everything you and your family has done for us, this is hardly enough,” Vincent replied. “Arthur, we have some swords in the back if you want to take a look while you’re here. They might not be anything special, but I’m sure you’ll be able to find a solid sword to last you until your body finishes growing.”

“Oh! Are you planning on taking lessons with the sword?” The King inquired, putting a hand on his son’s shoulder. “My boy has just started learning as well. Maybe you two can spar one day.”

“Swords are merely a hobby for me, Your Majesty. I would never hope to amount to the same level as your son,” I replied, turning back to redeem Vincent’s offer.

“Your Majesty, Prince Curtis would only become infected with bad habits if he began sparring with mere commoners,” Sebastian’s hissy voice rang.

As I turned back to retort, my father and the Twin Horns came into view.

“Ah, you guys are here! How did you enjoy the Auction?” my father exclaimed, picking up Ellie after showing his respects to the King and Queen.

My father pulled Vincent aside as he and the Twin Horns began debriefing about the event.

“Your Majesty. If I may have a word with you,” I heard Sebastian say as he leaned closely to the King’s ear.

After a few moments, King Glayder shot his royal guard an irritated glance, but let out a sigh.

As the two walked towards me, it was obvious what they had just discussed by the way Sebastian wasn’t even looking at me, but instead, at my bond.

However, instead of talking to me, the King called upon my father.

The King smiled at him, but his eyes remained stern. “I never did catch your name. You must be this young boy’s father, correct?” he affirmed rather than asked.

“My name is Reynolds Leywin and yes, that is the case. What might be the matter, Your Majesty?” my father replied, lowering himself slightly.

“Sebastian, here, has been a royal guard for a while now and has helped our family an uncountable amount of times.”

His voice stayed relaxed he spoke to my father, but the condescension in his tone was still apparent. “For the exemplary services he has provided me, and therefore the country, I do feel the need to reward him at times. You see; he has taken a fancy to your son’s bond. I know it’s not easy to sever a contract and I’m sure the boy has grown close to his little pet, but I would be more than willing hire a mage to take care of the contract and compensate you and your family for the troubles.”

“Y-Your Majesty,” my father stuttered, caught by surprise by the severe request. Taking a glance at me, he turned back to the King. “I must apologize, Your Majesty. Neither I nor my wife had anything to do to with my son’s bond. He had acquired it himself, so I cannot speak on my son’s behalf on matters of his bond.”

“Hmm,” the King turned his attention to my direction, regarding me loftily, and I suddenly realized that I was returning his gaze. He realized, then, that for the entirety of their conversation, I had been staring icily at him and his guard.

“Boy. Didn’t your father teach you to lower your gaze when speaking to someone of your superior?” Sebastian snarled in disdain as he slammed the end of his metal staff to the ground.

“Sebastian, silence!” The King held up his hand. Besides the royal family and their guards, the King’s request had caught the attention of the rest of my family as well as Vincent’s.

“Hello, child.” The King approached, standing an arm’s length away from me. “I’m sure you’ve just heard me speak to your father so I won’t repeat myself. How about it? My royal armory would certainly have a sword befitting that of any aspiring knight.”

Not wanting to make a big commotion, I swallowed back the profanity that was itching to spew out of my mouth. “Thank you, Your Majesty, for your gracious offer, but I must refuse. A simple sword could never replace Sylvie.”

“How dare—”

“Sebastian!” King Glayder roared. Turning back to me, he spoke again with a much more impatient tone. “How about a trade then? The world lion cub that I just purchased for your bond?”

“Father!” Curtis scurried over to his father, pulling on his sleeve. “I thought the mana beast was mine?” Ignoring his son, the King waited for my response.

“Perhaps I didn’t make myself clear. I do not wish to give, sell or trade my bond,” I reiterated, failing to mask the annoyed expression on my face.

“I have asked you twice, child, for a favor. Twice,” he emphasized, his tone growing grave. “I will ask you once more; will you give me your bond?”

The air was tense as everyone’s attention was directed at me. Sebastian gave me a menacing look from bloodshot eyes, just waiting to be released. The rest of the royal guards were on standby near the two, carefully observing the situation.

“Then let me ask you a question in response, Your Majesty. How much are you willing to sell your children to me?” I asked coolly, never batting an eye.

Thrown off-guard, the King wasn’t able to respond to the seemingly random question. “You have asked me twice and I have rejected you both times, yet it seems your pride won’t allow you to accept my refusal. You don’t seem to be aware of what you were asking me, so I hoped to clarify using my question instead. How much money should I give you in return for your son or your daughter, King Glayder?” I rephrased, without wavering.

I heard the sharp whistle of a sword leaving its scabbard. “Insolent peasant! You dare insult the King and his family?” a guard roared as he charged at me before anyone had the chance to respond.

The Beginning After The End – Chapter 25: Aftermath

As the sword arced towards me, I noticed that it had a faint glow of mana surrounding it. Augmenting his sword to attack an eight-year-old... this guy really showed no tact. The hood covering the guard’s face was blown back as he charged towards me, revealing a rugged veteran’s furious expression.

Faces of horror could be seen clearly from those around us. The Twin Horns desperately tried to make their way towards the guard when they saw him attack me, to stop him from cleaving me in two. Even the King looked surprised at the unprecedented action of his guard, while the Queen had already frantically started reaching for her wand.

My eyes stayed focused on the guard that was about to swing down, but I was quite relaxed. Whether or not it was because he was angry, or because the training the royal guards received was mediocre, his attack was rushed and full of openings. I didn’t even need to will mana into my body to deal with him. I took a step forward with my right foot as his sword swung down towards me, then reached up and grabbed the space on the grip of his sword between the cross-guard and his hand.

I proceeded to pivot on my right foot, using the momentum of his swing, while my body was parallel to the guard’s. His reinforced sword whistled harmlessly through the empty space where I’d just been, creating a small fissure in the ground, and conversely embedding his sword in it. In one smooth movement, I quickly struck him in the jaw, which he hadn’t bothered to guard with mana. The force of

my upward punch, combined with his downward movement from his swing, created an impact much stronger than I'd expected. The guard only managed to let out a low grunt before he crumpled to the ground.

My attention immediately focused, then, to Sebastian. As I had expected, the dense fool was silently muttering a spell as his beady eyes locked intently with mine.

SEBASTIAN'S POV:

'That impudent brat! He needs to learn his place! When the King asks for something, it isn't a request; it's an order! How dare he not only refuse, but also reprimand our noble King! That brat doesn't deserve his equals contract! I personally come from a family of pure conjurers; elite mages capable of bending nature to their will. I don't have a contract with a beast at all! Yet, that brat has a beast that was capable enough to form an equals contract at such a young age! That means that the beast's level is least A class!' I couldn't help but grind my teeth in frustration.

'I'm the one that deserves the magnificent steed that that beast will grow to become! And yet, he refused me? He refused the King?'

"Insolent peasant! You dare insult the King and his family?" Harry let out a roar as he charged towards the brat, his sword brandished high up in the air.

'Yes! Kill that brat! I guess augmenters do have their uses at times. Hahaha! After that brat's dead, that black mana beast will rightfully be mine!'

Yet, before I could even start cheering for him, he'd been knocked out.

"..."

'What the hell? How did that useless, half-witted fool manage to knock himself out? Ugh... I guess I'll have to handle this brat by myself.' As I began taking out my staff, I noticed the brat walking towards me.

I had to hold back a laugh. 'He's actually come towards me? Is he asking to die?' Well, I didn't really care at this point. That non-mage 'Vincent' was a close friend of the King, but I'll probably just get off with a light punishment for killing an insignificant brat.

Whatever bothersome punishment he served me would be well worth it after getting my hands on the brat's mana beast.

As I began silently chanting a spell, I couldn't help but grow irritated as he continued to approach me. Was he such a fool that he couldn't tell that he was about to die?

However, a twinge of unease began forming at the pit of my stomach. This boy, no background or power to save him, had such confidence. Why did I feel like this brat, who's only half my height, was somehow looking down at me; as if he was the one that was superior.

However, much stronger than my unease was harsh contempt for having something that I had been searching so hard for. 'You're just trying to make me want to kill you more, aren't you, brat?'

He arrived in front of me just as I was about to finish my Fire Spark spell.

All of a sudden, a piercing crunch sounded from beneath me before I dropped to my knees.

“...”

‘That’s weird. Why did I suddenly lose balance?’

I glanced down, only to see someone’s knee bent inwards, along with the bones, tendons still attached, sticking out of the skin.

‘T-t-that’s my leg!’

“GAAAAAAAAAAAAHHHHH!”

“M-MY LEG! MY LEG!! AHHHHHHHH!”

IT HURTS! IT HURTS IT HURTS IT HURTS IT HURTS IT HURTS IT HURTS IT HURTS! I’ve never felt such excruciating pain in my life! Why should a noble conjurer like myself need to feel pain?

‘W-Why is no-one helping me?’ As I frantically looked around, it was apparent that everyone was somehow frozen. They weren’t just surprised, but actually frozen in place.

It was then that I noticed that the colors of my surrounding had been flipped, or reversed. ‘Have my eyes been clouded from the pain?’

“This space won’t last long, so I’ll make it quick. I’ll tell you right now that it would be best for both of us if you stopped your hopeless pursuit of my bond. I don’t wish to make an enemy of this Kingdom’s leader, thus I’m giving you one last chance.”

The boy was speaking in a manner that made me completely forget his age. The tone of his words, coupled with the way he articulated them, carried both power and dignity, caused a terrifying sensation that I had felt before.

‘It was him back in the room!’ As I thought this, the pressure bore down on me, forcing me to fearfully comply.

He turned his back to me as he walked away, taking a few steps forward, before suddenly glancing back at me.

He looked at me with an emotionless face, his eyes seeming to pierce straight into my brain like a hot needle, actually making me wince in pain.

‘No... No, no, no... I can’t breathe! I-I’m scared!’ The torturous pain had been somewhat numbed. Instead, I could feel a warm sensation between my legs as my body accepted its fate of death.

His eyes continued to bore down at me in blatant disgust as I tried to stop my body from shivering.

He looked at me as if I was simply an insect, and slowly mouthed,

“Know. Your. Place.”

KING GLAYDER’S POV:

While the implication of his message towards the King of a country was provoking, this eight-year-old's reasoning and argument fascinated me.

Even though Sebastian was a loyal guard that had served us for decades, it was beneath me to make this kid give up his pet. And yet, I still promised him beforehand that I would. Who would I be if I were to go back on my word?

Then, everything went south. 'Do the Royal Knight Guards only amount to this much...? To rush in simply because of an eight-year-old's provocation?'

I didn't bring my personal Templar Knights, thinking that there wouldn't be any trouble, but I couldn't have guessed that these fresh trainees would cause this much trouble...

Although it surprised me, I quickly composed myself. What's done is done. If a royal guard was to kill this child, the public might pity him and his family for a couple of days, but ultimately the fault would lie in the child's parents for getting in my way.

It was a pity that this kid's family was friends with Vincent. Cutting ties with the auction house owner may turn out to be... a bit inconvenient, in the future.

Yet, outside of all expectations, the eight-year-old displayed a series of movements that couldn't be more impeccably executed even if a Tempar Knight had done it. So deftly did the boy knock out my Royal Guardsman.

'Harry, you fool. How inexperienced do you have to be that you even forgot to reinforce your body?! The only thing you're doing is give a bad name to the Royal Knights of Sapin!'

"KYAAAAAAAAAAA!" I instantly turned my head in the direction of the shrill scream.

My wife was staring wide-eyed at something behind me, causing me to turn around to get a better look.

'How is Sebastian, who was fine just a second ago, now on the ground clutching his left leg like that? His leg has several shards of bone sticking out, yet he's just glaring daggers at the boy?'

The conjurer fumbled for his staff on the ground and as soon as he grabbed it, pointed it at the boy while starting to mumble a spell.

"Enough, Sebastian!" I roared at him. Did this ignorant fool not know that all of this stemmed from his greed for a child's bond?

I grabbed his staff and snapped it in half. Sebastian just looked at me in shock—as if I'd betrayed him.

This pathetic ingrate...

"Stand down! This matter is over," I growled menacingly at him as we locked eyes.

'He is in the presence of a King! No matter how much he has gotten used to it, it's best that I remind him that I can end his life on a whim.'

As soon as I finished this thought, the boy fainted. His family and, what I can only assume were his friends, immediately rushed towards him. I sighed. 'Settling this incident will be rather tiring.'

I could see that the boy's family and friends were struggling not to lash out at me.

'How wise of them to know their place in front of their King.'

Thinking about the trouble this had caused, and what it will take to deal with it, I let out a deep breath.

"I imagine that that boy needs to be treated; please excuse yourselves so that we can settle this matter another time," I announced as I guided my wife and children outside, leaving the two pathetic clowns that I'd been foolish enough to once call Royal Knights to be picked up by his teammates.

ARTHUR LEYWIN'S POV:

'Gah! My head!'

I pried open my eyes, curious as to where I was, but everything was blurry. As my vision slowly cleared, I carefully turned my head to the right and to the left.

It was my room.

"Kyu!" Sylvie woke up almost immediately and began licking my face. 'You're awake! You're awake!' she chirped, her tail wagging fiercely.

"Mmm...? Oh, you're finally awake!" My mom had her head in her arms as she leaned on my bed.

"The doctor said that you probably fell unconscious from shock, and that you'd wake up soon. However, I didn't think 'soon' would be eight hours." She ran her fingers gently through my hair, giving me a soft smile.

It was evident from her red eyes that she'd been crying for a while. A bitter taste filled my mouth in regret from making her worry again

"What happened after I passed out?" I willed myself to sit up, placing the excited Sylvie on my lap.

"We all left shortly after you fell unconscious. No one was in their right state of mind, thus the King excused himself first. Your father is downstairs with the King's representative. They're in the living room discussing what happened." Her eyes quivered in worry.

I simply nodded in response and got out of bed. My body still felt heavy from using the first phase of Sylvia's Draconic Will, so I limped slowly downstairs with Mother after she checked in on Ellie, who was asleep in her room.

As we made our way downstairs, I could hear my father, along with an elderly man's hoarse voice.

Upon seeing me, the representative suddenly stood up, giving me a slight bow, a bit of a relieved look on his weathered face. My father's back was facing me, so he only turned to look when he saw the old man start to get up.

"My son! You're awake!" He hurled himself over the couch and wrapped me in a bear hug, his hand cupping the back of my head.

"Yeah Dad, I'm fine. What're you guys talking about?"

“This representative came by with a few gold coins as a ‘token of apology’ from the King. ‘For the small incident,’” my father answered through clenched teeth.

“The Royal King has also ordered me to inform the Leywin family that both guards that attacked Arthur Leywin have been stripped of nobility,” the representative added, his voice cracking.

“For almost killing my son, the King just gave them a slap on the wrist, and then waved them goodbye?” My father couldn’t help but be livid from the frustration.

“Father, it’s all right! Look, I wasn’t hurt. Let’s just end this matter.” I squeezed my father’s hand, giving him a reassuring look.

The King seemed like a decent enough character, but in times like this, I guess his priorities lie elsewhere.

The representative just looked at us matter-of-factly—as if it was a given that whatever the King had done was the right thing.

Letting out a sigh, I took a seat. ‘I’m too tired for this c**p.’

Casting aside the issue, I asked about Sebastian, in case he’d said anything. “What happened to that Conjuror? The one who had his knee broken?”

The representative just shook his head a little. “We don’t know. Our experts hypothesized that it was due to the mana that the Knight attacked you with ricocheting and hitting his knee.”

I just shrugged at this. Looks like the matter was settled more easily than I had expected.

After the elderly representative left—mainly because my father had grown impatient with his attitude—he turned around and gave me a grin.

“Good job knocking out that Augmenter. That’s my son!” He put his fist out in front of him, which I promptly pounded with my own fist, smiling.

“Where are the Twin Horns anyway? I thought they’d be here.”

My mother answered me while chuckling, “We had to keep them away from this, otherwise they might’ve really turned into wanted criminals.”

I laughed at this, but I could tell that it was something they were genuinely worried about by the helpless look on my father’s face.

According to my mother, the Twin Horns were waiting at a nearby Inn. My father told me that we’d head out there tomorrow for breakfast, and would discuss me being an adventurer with them. I nodded at this and went back into my room. My birthday was in less than two weeks. I’d finally be able to make my first mark here in this world.

As I sunk back down in my bed, I stared at the palms of my hands, idly thinking about the events from earlier. This was the first time I’d used Sylvia’s Draconic Will. These past years that I had spent studying Sylvie’s will, before assimilating it into my body and practicing it for four months, had caused me to sigh in wonder at just how powerful Sylvia was.

I was just tapping into the ocean that was Sylvia's powers. Unlike Grandpa Virion, who could only get a speed boost and blend into his surroundings, being a legacy tamer allowed me to access a lot more of Sylvia's powers at stage one.

What I had used on Sebastian was something that I decided to name 'Distortion'. I could basically separate myself from time and space for a brief moment. Although I couldn't alter anything around me, it did give me time to assess my situation. Earlier today, I'd exceeded my limits by using Distortion on another person as well. This had allowed me to get by unnoticed from the King—for now. I wasn't strong enough to act against him yet.

My current limit with Distortion, before I received any backlash, was two seconds. However today, I had used it on another person, as well as had prolonged it to five seconds. I'd done all that just to scare that bug named Sebastian. I'd used up all of my mana and passed out for half a day—just to terrify a bug. Maybe it would've been better to kill him.

No, I couldn't think like that anymore. Causing meaningless deaths just for my convenience wasn't something that I should do in this world. I needed to be different in this world.

I shook my head. I had a lot of time. Since I had so much time, I needed to be patient.

I unwrapped the package that Vincent had left beside my bed, only to see a completely white mask that was able to cover my entire face. It was a simple mask, with two sharp eye slits that curved upwards; it reminded me of a fox's eyes. There was no nose or mouth hole; just a singular blue streak that ran straight down the left side of the mask, through the left eye slit.

I tried the mask on, which somehow stuck to my face without the need of a strap. I also tried on the midnight blue coat, which turned out to be a little long. After strapping on the coat, it suddenly shrunk to fit my body perfectly.

I couldn't help but be embarrassed; I felt like some sort of wannabe assassin or vigilante.

"Ahh, ahh. Testing. Testing." The tone of my voice surprised me. It sounded completely different. My immature, high-pitched voice had become a rich, baritone.

"Kuu?" Sylvie just looked at me curiously, causing me to laugh and take off my getup.

"Aren't you excited? Don't you want to get a little bit of action as well, Sylv?" I patted her head, as my head swam with images of being an adventurer.

The Beginning After The End – Chapter 26: Partners In Crime

"So... who's it going to be?" My father took a sip of his coffee, setting it down on the round wooden table we were all seated around.

We had been currently just finished eating breakfast with the Twin Horns party., who The group had chosen a rather modest inn full of lively chatter. As they conversed while eating breakfast, while my Mother was currently busy wiping off the remains of food chunks bits of food that had managed to escape my sister's mouth off of her.

“Kuu!” Sylvie hopped up onto the table, with her head held high. Even without her mentally transmitting, everyone was able to make out that, ‘I’m enough to protect Papa!’, everyone was able to tell that that’s what she was thinking.

“Sylvie! Come here~!” My sister wagged a piece of meat in front of Sylvie, tempting my legendary dragon bond, who instantly began to drooling like a starving puppy, right before she leapt into my sister’s arms.

When I saw this, I couldn’t help but chuckle at the thought of Sylvie wagging her tail at a bandit smart enough to simply lure her away with a piece of meat.

Apparently my father’s ex-party members had just finished a dungeon exploration with several other parties, so they had some free time before their next mission or quest. Thus, it wasn’t really a matter of if they had the time, but rather if any of them wanted to.

Adam, who spoke up first while polishing the tip of his spear, was the first to speak up., “Babysitting doesn’t really fit my style, so I’ll pass on this. Besides, I feel like, with my personality, Arthur might kill me in my sleep one day.”

Despite the joke, my father responded with a solemn nod. He knew what kind of temperament Adam had, and in-turn knew that they weren’t likely to get along with each other.

“I was hoping that Durden or Helen would accompany Arthur. Honestly, although I can’t offer much, but Alice and I are more than willing to compensate you guys in whatever way we can if you do this.”

“Don’t talk like that, Rey, we’re all family here. I, for one. would love to accompany him and watch him grow, anyhow,” the gentle giant responded, his narrow eyes becoming even smaller as he smiled.

“Durden is right. You, of all people, should know that we aren’t doing this for the money. Besides, we managed to get quite a bit of treasures off from of our last dungeon raid.” Helen said, shaking her head.

Suddenly, a silent hand shot up, making everyone at the table turn to look.

“I would like to volunteer.”

“J-Jasmine? You, you want to go with Arthur?” Angela sputtered, looking at her brusque companion in shock.

Angela had made it clear about how eager she was to accompany me, but I felt like Angela would be a greater source of danger than any of the possible threats of an adventurer. I tried to lightly hint that she might not be the most suitable but even I was surprised that Jasmine would take the initiative to accompany me.

“Hmm... Logically speaking, Jasmine is the most suitable person to protect Arthur. Durden only specializes in offensive area of effect spells. Although I do want to go with Arthur too, but I feel that maybe I’m probably not the most suitable person since protecting someone isn’t really my strong suit.” Helen just scratches her head.

“Jasmine, are you really okay with going along with Arthur?” my mother asked, concerned.

Giving my mother a determined look, she looked at my mother with a determined gaze as she nodded firmly in response.

“Pfft! The lady says she wants to go, let her go. She’s the only Augmenter among us that has an elemental affinity! She just reached the dark yellow stage last year, and coupled with her wind attribute, I think she’d be the best suited.” Adam said after a let out a chuckle as he leaned back on his chair.

“Hmm... For Arthur’s safety, I guess I’ll just have to step down from this. It’s a pity though.” Durden just scratched his head, clearly disappointed.

“Sorry, Durden, I know how much you care about Arthur.” My father put an arm on the large mage’s shoulder.

“Maybe I’ll join the Twin Horns on a dungeon raid in the future!” I exclaimed. Durden just smiled at this, giving me a nod as he tousled my hair. The rest of the Twin Horns chuckled merrily as we finished up our conversation.

It was decided that, in a week’s time, I would go with Jasmine to the Adventurer’s Guild and register myself. I would automatically start off as an E class adventurer after passing a simple test and could, depending on how well I do on any missions or on quests I take, raise my class accordingly.

Getting back home, I spotted Lilia downstairs —meditating— right as when a maid was gently placed a cup of water by her side.

“Uu... Lily no fair! Training without me!” My sister rushed past my side and plopped down into a comfortable sitting position to start her mana manipulation training as well.

As far as I could tell, it would take the both of them a few more years to actually form a mana core, but at the pace that Lilia was going, it was easy to imagine that she would awaken around the average time most children did.

On the other hand, Ellie didn’t have the patience for training, and grew bored after an hour or two, so it would take her a lot longer. That’s fine though, I wouldn’t want her to become a mage too early, as; she would attract too much unwanted attention. I would be proud if she could simply can form a mana core by the age of nine or ten.

Putting away my jacket, I turned back to face my father, who was still making his way up the stairs.

“Dad, can we go to the Auction House again? I’d like to pick out a sword? We never had the chance to after the incident, and I’ve wanted to start practicing.”

“Yeah, I have a few things I need to tell my team there anyway. We’ll ask the carriage driver to stay for a little bit, so go wash up.”

Both Lilia’s father and mother were already waiting for us at their auction house. It was my first time seeing either of them after the incident so I was faced with another long string of questions from the two of them regarding my health. After much coaxing and reassuring them that I was fine, we finally went inside. I could tell that Vincent had been less than thrilled by the treatment the King had shown

regarding this incident, but at this point, just like how the King felt towards me, I only felt apathy towards the man. It was clear that he had not put me into any sort of consideration besides that of a less-than-insignificant child, which suited me just fine for now.

The King's representative had told us that night that both the augments that had attacked me and Sebastian had been stripped of their nobility. Vincent merely scoffed when my father told him this, though.

Rolling his eyes, the auction house owner spat out that their sentencing was nothing but comforting lies. "Bah! Men like them... as soon as they get their wrists slapped, and they just take a relaxing break for a bit, they'll be long before they'll have their positions back."

I noticed my father tightly clenching his fists, but these sort of politics were all too familiar to me.

Father went off with Vincent to meet the guards, while Tabitha took our carriage back to take care of Lilia, leaving me with only Sylvie search for a sword.

Perched on my head, my bond curiously looked around the cluttered storage hall, littered with vaguely sorted crates and shelves of miscellaneous goods. Vincent had told me that the Helstea Auction House stored a lot of goods, most from different merchants and adventurers, and others from remote places, including the Dwarf Kingdom.

There had been almost no business transactions done with elves ever since the war over a neutral territory had reached a stalemate. Over the years, relations between the two races were said to have gotten better, to the point of even having a friendly tournament, but it would be a slow process before the enmity is actually ceased. This was a pity since elf weapons, which were comparatively lighter and thinner, would've been perfect for someone of my physique.

Something I had learned while living with the Eralith family in Elenoir was that, while both weapons and armors forged by dwarves were considered the highest class because of the race's innate mastery in the field, elves had their specialties in bows as well as conjurer staffs and wands.

Most of the enchanted weapons were bid during the event yesterday, so the only things left were regular weapons that would eventually be sold in stalls, which was fine for me; I wasn't looking for anything special, just dependable.

Peering through the endless rows of shelves and racks, I picked out a few to test. It didn't take long before I stuffed it back on the shelf it came from, malcontent by the crude workmanship of the swords. The balance between the blade and the grip had all been off and were shaped sloppily with no mind for executing all but simple swings or thrusts.

I didn't think of myself as overly nitpicky, but after hours of scouring through the room, it was clear that my taste in swords had become too particular.

Sylvie, growing bored of the repeated actions of removing a sword, swinging it a few times, and unhappily putting it back in place, hopped off my head and began having her own little adventure.

I treaded deeper into the large storage hall, passing the shelves and racks of the more appealing blades on display and arriving at a section where sheathed swords were simply crammed in barrels.

One thing I noticed about the swords in this world was that they fell into a couple of categories:

There were the large swords, either the wide heavy swords, or the long claymores. Many warriors and offensive augmenters preferred these behemoths because of the raw power that could be generated through a single swing, but others considered the weapons savage and unrefined.

The more balanced swords, seen most commonly used by knights and adventurers alike, were the broadswords. These were generally wielded with one hand, coupled with a shield in the other, but there are two-handed varieties. These swords provided the most balanced and versatile performances and were the standard swords to begin learning swordsmanship.

The last category of swords were the lighter and thinner blades. Weapons like sabers, curved single-edged swords—which my world called katanas— and rapiers as well as daggers all fell into this category. Sabers, katanas, and rapiers were focused on speed and precision while daggers were often used as a concealed weapon or dual-wielded for more versatile and acrobatic styles of fighting.

Even if the weapons here were second rate, the inner swordsman in me couldn't help but bubble in excitement.

However, it didn't take long for that bubble to pop. Letting out a defeated sigh from my fruitless search for a sword, I mindlessly swung the plain short sword I had picked out earlier and barely deemed acceptable. I would have to settle for this sword if I couldn't find anything else.

Giving up on the search for a better sword, I made my way into the miscellaneous section where they held different types of weapons. I could see various unique, albeit inefficient, weapons that looked like they were designed by a child.

Navigating through the aisles, I couldn't help but laugh aloud as I came across something very similar to what my world called nunchucks. There was even a morning star that was so heavy that, even after augmenting myself with mana, I struggled to lift it off the ground.

"Whew! Looks like a dead end Sylv." I sat down on the ground, leaning against a gigantic shield as Sylvie continued to trot about.

Suddenly, Sylvie let out an eager chirp.

Making my way towards my bond, I spotted Sylv digging through a pile of weapons. A cloud of dust soon encompassed us as Sylvie continued searching for something.

Making another excited squeak, she used her front paw to point at an unremarkable black rod.

It was less than a meter in length and just looked like some sort of walking cane.

"This wasn't what I was looking for Sylv," I sighed, but she hopped to me, nudging me toward the black stick.

Relenting, I walked over and picked it up, surprised by the weight of the rod that looked much thinner now that it was in my hand.

While it seemed to be made of some kind of polished wood, it weighed a lot more than just a simple walking stick.

Holding it up, I took a closer look, inspecting the rod more carefully.

The stick had a matte coat to it, not reflecting any light at all, while the whole rod was smooth to the touch.

While unnoticeable at first, I could see intricate indentations that formed a design throughout the pole, but other than that, I couldn't find anything special about it.

Sylvie continued gazing at the rod in my hands, her golden eyes twinkling as if she had found a national treasure.

Finding nothing remarkable about it, I tried swinging it.

It felt good.

The weight was distributed in a way where it was balanced like a sword, even more so than the short sword I picked out as a backup. Taking another swing made me confident that this rod's balance was too purposeful for it to be just used as a walking stick or a staff.

Excitement growing inside me once more, I willed mana into my eyes. I had hoped to notice something with enhanced vision and my hopes came to light. It was so faint that I only noticed it after reinforced mana into my eyes; even then, I was only able to spot it because I was looking for it.

Even more faint than the indentation markings over the pole, was a small line that seemed to separate two parts of the stick.

"..."

This was a sword!

I immediately tried to pry the sword out of its scabbard, but it wouldn't budge. Even with my body reinforced with mana, I wasn't able to muster the strength to pull it out.

Don't tell me this was some sort of Excalibur that I had to be worthy of...

Pushing away the silly thought, I infused fire attribute mana into the sword, but still, no use.

After half an hour had passed, I realize that elemental attribute mana was not the answer.

...No way... what if...

I activated Dragon Will. I didn't use its power but simply infused the Will into the sword. And, despite all of the previous struggle to pry the sword out, a light tug was all it took for the sword to glide out of its sheath.

The Beginning After The End – Chapter 27: Worth Fighting For

The sword slid soundlessly from its sheath to reveal the flat blade.

I couldn't help but swallow back a lump of air as I fell into a trance, staring at the weapon much too beautiful to be considered an ordinary weapon.

The narrow blade was straight and thin like a rapier's but had a double edge, making it fit for slashing as well as thrusting. As the keen edge of the blade curved smoothly into a sharp tip, I couldn't help but notice that there were no markings—that the blade had been sharpened. The weight and balance of the sword was a bit off in my opinion but it was still much better than the crude tools I had picked up before. However, even this flaw was overshadowed by the breathtaking quality and color of the blade.

The translucent teal hue of the blade seemed to almost generate a luster of its own, even inside the dim storage room. There was a stark contrast to the matte-black scabbard and handle, making the color of the blade all the more radiant. Despite the fact that the blade was so narrow and thin, a few tests on a nearby iron container confirmed its durability and strength.

I could say with confidence that, even in my old world, there wasn't a blade as well-forged as this. Was this sword truly meant for beast tamers or was its criteria even more particular? I thought as I looked down at Sylvie.

Titling her tiny head, Sylvie let out a happy chirp in response.

Studying the blade more closely, I spotted a small engraving inscribed on the blade near the grip.

Dawn's Ballad W.K. IV

As soon as those words left my lips, a searing pain abruptly shot out from where I was gripping the sword, making me drop the weapon.

There was a gash that had already been cauterized across my palm. I was hesitant to pick the sword back up again, but when I did, I could see the faint remains of my blood getting absorbed into the handle of the blade.

"Kuu!" Are you okay, Papa? Sylvie trotted next to me, pawing my leg, concerned.

I'm fine, Sylv. After scratching the underside of my bond's chin, I gave the sword another swing. This time, the point of balance of the sword aligned perfectly to match with my undeveloped body. Even the handle of the blade seemed to have grown smaller to fit in my hand, as if it was made for me.

There were some extraordinarily valuable staffs and wands that had the ability to bond with a single user, allowing better manipulation of mana between the weapon and master, but I'd never heard of a sword doing something like this.

Picking up the sword, I pondered over the man, whose initial was "W.K. IV." Who was this person and how was he capable of forging such a sword?

I realized how much time had passed as my father's faint voice snapped me out of infatuated trance. Quickly sheathing my new sword, I made my way back to where my father was, Sylvie hitching a ride on top of my head. On the way back, I made sure to pick up the short sword I chose for back up.

"Well? Did you see anything you liked?" Vincent, who had been talking with my father, asked.

I nodded, holding up the short sword to him, "I found this sword and, after a few swings, I've grown to like it. Is it okay for me to take this one?"

Vincent took the weapon from my hand, drawing the sword from its scabbard. “Hmmm, not the best quality sword but it is solid and won’t break easily. Rey, what do you think?”

My father accepted the sword, studying its blade, grip and guard before taking a several swings and thrusts. “The balance isn’t the best but I think it’ll be good as a first sword. What’s that stick you’re holding onto, though?”

Trying not to make a big deal out of it, I gave casual shrug. “I tripped over this really sturdy stick on my way back here. Do you mind if I take this back home to practice with, Uncle Vincent?”

“Ah that old thing! I remember one of my merchants telling me how some senile old man just handed it to him, mumbling something about finding a worthy master. We had a few of our inspectors check if there was anything special about it, but for all they were able to find out, it was just a sturdy, hard cane. It’s been gathering dust here so if you think it’ll do you some good, go ahead and take it,” Vincent answered, lightly squeezing my shoulder.

Success.

****Kingdom of Elenoir****

TESSIA ERALITH’S POV:

“Haaaaaaaaaaa...” I let out an exaggerated sigh, looking out the window from my room. My hands were getting numb from leaning my head on it for so long, but I didn’t want to move as I only grew more annoyed.

How dare he! Stupid Art!

Finally willing myself to get up, I let out my pent up frustration by kicking the wall.

“Ouch!”

Stupid Art! This is his fault too!

Cradling my aching foot, I wiped the tears that had welled up in my eyes, unsure of whether it was from the pain of my foot or my loneliness.

I had just gotten back from Grandma Rinia’s home. It was hard, but I was finally able to guilt-trip her into letting me spy—I mean, make sure that Art was doing okay.

I should be happy that he’s with his family and everything... but doesn’t he miss me?

He looked too happy! And who’s that girl? Wasn’t Art acting a little too nice to her? That cunning girl even got Art to teach her how to manipulate mana!

He never taught me!

That Arthur... When I get my hands on him, I’m going to give him a piece of my...haa... who am I kidding, I just want to see him.

It’d been a few months since he had left but after getting so used to seeing him every day, those months had felt like years.

“Maybe I should’ve treated him more nicely while he was here,” I muttered aloud.

I couldn’t help but cringe remembering all of the times I had physically abused him, just as an excuse to touch him.

But that wasn’t my fault! It’s his fault for being such a thickheaded idiot!

Mama and Papa were quite proud that Feyrith, the noble brat who messed with Art, and his sister were able to place in the top five during the trial competition that they had with the humans, but I couldn’t care less. It was just a show to boast our strength to the humans and dwarves anyway.

Grandpa had mentioned that the actual Continental Tournament—which was what the humans decided to call it—would happen every five years from now on. Did that mean I would have to wait five years to see Art? Five whole years?

“Uuu...” This sucked. The only thing that kept my mind off of Art was training. My goal was to become stronger than Arthur. The next time we meet, I wanted to surprise him by how much I’d grown. Maybe then he’d see me in a different light.

Stupid Arthur, I repeated. Even though he was younger than me, he still treated me like a kid.

Even though I’m the older one...

I held up the water-filled orb that Granny Rinia gave to me as a present. She was able to capture a scene and integrate it into the orb so that it would constantly show an image of Arthur’s face.

“D***y!” I cursed at the bubble, poking the sphere where the image of Arthur’s cheek was.

Suddenly, the door flung open. “Young one, I have good—”

“Grandpa! What did I say about knocking?!” I squealed, quickly trying to hide the orb behind me. However, by the sly grin on his face, I knew that he had already noticed.

“I see you’re using that orb well,” he snickered as his usual, stern expression was replaced by that of a wily fox.

“Stupid Grandpa!” I reached for my pillow nearby and flung it at him before he could see how red my face had turned.

“Don’t mind, don’t mind! I would rather enjoy having Arthur as a grandson-in-law, anyhow! But isn’t it a little too early for that now?” He roared out in laughter as he continued teasing me.

Whipping my head away from Grandpa, I did my best to hide my embarrassment, unable to let out anything other than a frustrated grumble in response to his ridicule.

“Don’t pout now! I’ve got some good news for you, Little One.” I turned my head slightly just to indicate that I was listening.

Letting out another hearty laugh, he spoke. “Now, what if I said that you could have the chance to attend the same school that Arthur will be attending—”

My body spun so fast that I grew dizzy. "Then I would say that you're the best Grandpa ever!" I cut him off before he even finished speaking. "You're not lying to me, right?" I grabbed Grandpa's sleeve and tugged it hard.

I heard a chuckle from the doorway. "Did you tell her, Father?" Mama and Papa walked into the room, smiling.

I turned to them, "Mama! Papa! Is it true? I can go to school with Arthur?"

"Calm down, Tess," my mother gently chided as she patted my head.

"Your Grandfather has close ties with the current Director of Xyrus Academy. He got in contact with her recently and she was excitedly telling your Grandfather about how there will be a genius quadra-elemental augments attending her school in three years' time," my father added.

"Who else besides Arthur is a quadra-elemental augments? I instantly knew, but of course, I didn't say anything about me training him. That is a little secret I plan on surprising her with later on," he let out an evil grin.

"Why is he waiting three years before going to school? Isn't he more than fit to go now?" I tried to speak casually, but my excitement had me grinning to my ears.

"Well, she did mention something about him wanting to be an adventurer," Grandpa mused.

My mother gently squeezed my hands. "The important part is that this gives us enough time. We're still trying to negotiate terms to have a trial run for the integration of the younger generations of elves and dwarves to attend school together with the humans at Xyrus Academy. The King of Sapin agreed that the only way to start mending our relationship was by allowing the younger generation to form bonds with each other," she explained.

"You'd better train hard, Little One. A lot is riding on this. I'm willing to bet that Arthur had chosen to become an adventurer before attending school so that he could get some real experience in fighting. After he's done, he'll be at the age a typical student would be in, so stay on your toes. He's going to be popular, so if you don't s****h him, some other lucky girl will." Grandpa shot me an evil wink.

"Father, I think that's enough teasing now. Look, Tess is about to cry!" I could barely make out my father shaking his head through my watery eyes as I tried to stay strong.

****Kingdom of Sapin****

ARTHUR LEYWIN'S POV:

"HAPPY BIRTHDAY ARTHUR!" everyone cried out in unison.

The whole Helstea house was decorated lavishly with festive ornaments and woven threads as the Twin Horns and the Helstea family as well as my own gathered together to congratulate my ninth birthday.

"Thank you all for bearing with me!" I gave a deep bow as Sylvie mimicked me, nodding her small head.

The dinner turned out amazing as the chefs went all out tonight. My mother made sure to include some of my favorite dishes, some of which she made herself.

A panorama of noise filled the halls: laughter of the kids, the clinking of wine glasses and busy footsteps of maids and butlers. The table was pleasantly loud as Adam belched loud jokes and made fun of some of the members with their embarrassing moments while exploring the dungeon.

“Adam, you seem to forget the time when a horned mole snuck up under you while you were taking a p**s in the dungeon. As I recall, you got so scared, you landed straight on your back, peeing on yourself like a fountain,” Jasmine coolly said as she casually continued sipping her tea, not even bothering to look at the petrified Adam.

“Pfft!” The food in my mouth sprayed out as I tried to contain my laughter. My father blatantly roared with laughter, nearly falling back in his chair as he pointed his finger at the frozen Adam. Even Vincent had his face buried in his hands as he tried to keep from laughing.

“No! Y-You! I thought n-no one was awake when that happened?!” Adam’s face turned ghostly pale and his shoulders slumped in utter defeat. Meanwhile, the women just shook their heads in embarrassment at the men’s behaviors.

All in all, everyone was having a great time. Ellie chimed in eager to tell all of us about her adventures in learning how to read and write, trying to be a part of the grown-up conversations as well, while Lilia just giggled and agreed.

After dinner, everyone migrated to the living room where the fire had just been lit and area filled with a smoky fragrance.

“Happy Birthday again, Son. This present is from your mother and I, and of course, Ellie as well.” My father handed me a package wrapped in cloth while Mother was holding back Ellie, who’s fidgeting fingers were eager to unwrap the present.

Opening it, I saw a fingerless glove meant only for my left hand. It was black and simple but embedded on the top of the glove were 3 white stones.

“Your father hunted the material for the glove and I imbued my healing spells unto those three white stones. Each of the stones carries a single-use spell. I’m sure it’ll be useful to have some safety measures while you go out on missions.” My mother looked at me with sad smile. I could tell she still wasn’t ready to send me off.

“Thanks Mom, Dad, Ellie, I love it. This’ll be really useful for me.” I gave each of my family members a big hug. Putting on the glove, I could tell how sturdy the material was, not to mention that the three healing spells would be extremely useful in a tight situation.

“Ahem! Next is us!” Vincent pulled out a small box. He dramatically got down on one knee and opened the box, revealing two silver rings, one plain, and one with a small clear gem.

“...”

Uhh.... Where was he going with this?

“Honey! Stop teasing the boy!” Tabitha smacked Vincent’s shoulder while he held in his laughter.

“Okay, okay! Arthur, this is more of a present for your family than you but I’m sure you’ll appreciate it as well.”

“This ring,” Vincent pulled out the plain ring, “Is what you will be wearing, while this ring,” he handed the gemmed ring to my mother, “Is what your mother will be wearing.”

Tabitha continued on for him, “Alice, while Arthur is wearing the ring, you’ll be able to tell whether he’s okay or not. The plain ring is able to keep tabs on the mana circulation that naturally flows in a mage’s body. If the natural mana flow stops, the ring you’re holding, Alice, will glow red and emit a high-pitched sound.”

“We thought really hard on what Arthur may need during his time as an adventurer, but Lilia was actually the one that brought up the possibility of giving a present that’ll help him and his family. Unfortunately, the rings can’t do much more than that but I thought this would bring you some peace of mind Alice, Rey.” Vincent shrugged his shoulders.

My mother teared up while clutching onto the ring. “Oh Tabitha, Lilia, thank you!” She hugged the both of them in a tight embrace. “Thank you, Vincent.” She gave Vincent a deep bow while he shook his hands, saying how this was nothing much.

I couldn’t help but smile, looking at my mother.

If this ring could free my family from constantly worrying about me, then this was the best gift I could ask for. But I couldn’t help but become concerned at the psychological presence wearing the ring would have on my mother; she might end up checking it religiously.

“Well how are we going to beat that, guys?” Adam chimed in. My guardian angel Durden walked towards me, handing me a roll of parchment.

“You see, we also thought along the same lines as the Helstea family. We couldn’t really think of what to give the little monster so we decided on this!” Adam waved his arm in a dramatic manner.

“Those two scrolls are sound transmission scrolls! I’m not going to elaborate on how expensive these were, because they were extremely expen—ouch!” Jasmine smacked Adam on the head.

“Cough! Anyways! With this, you now have a one-time source of communication. Just infuse mana into the scroll, Arthur, and you’ll be able to send a message to the other scroll. After the holder of the other scroll receives it, Mama Leywin, she can then send the reply! After the reply is sent and the other person listens to it, the parchment will then turn to ashes! TADA! You’re welcome!” Adam gave a dramatic bow.

The members of the Twin Horns were all taking turns talking smack about Adam’s egotistical performance, but they gave my family a warm smile.

I could tell my mother and father’s moods had turned a whole lot better after knowing that they wouldn’t be sending their son off to who knows where without knowing how he was doing and what would become of him.

I gave each of the Twin Horns and the Helstea family a hug, thanking them for the presents. Lilia turned beet red while Tabitha just giggled at her.

Honestly, I already had what I needed, but the ring and scroll would be an invaluable source of comfort for my family, which I was worried about the most.

Soon after, my parents' ex-party members all left to go back to their inn. The Helstea family went back upstairs when Lilia started dozing off, tired from the long day, leaving me with just my parents. Ellie was asleep while cuddling the snoring Sylvie. I was already all packed up, prepared to leave tomorrow morning and meet up with Jasmine in front of the house. Tonight would be the last chance to have a real talk before I left.

"Tomorrow is the big day, Son. Are you excited?" My father clasped my shoulders. My father's eyes were lined red as I could see him holding back some tears.

My mother had given up on holding back her emotions and kneeled down to give me a big, bear hug, her face buried in my chest as she sniffled.

"I'll be fine Mom, Dad. I promise I'll try to be back home every chance I get. If anything happens, you'll be able to know."

After talking about my life and the dangers of being an adventurer, my parents ushered me back into my room. I plopped into bed and stared at the ceiling, Sylvie asleep next to me. I had a family and now, I had people who loved me. I had people that cared about me for who I was, not for the position I had. It was a nice feeling that I would never want to give up. I'd fight for it and make sure to treasure this emotion that I was devoid of in my previous world. For that, I needed to better myself. More so than when I had been a king.

The Beginning After The End – Chapter 28: Examination

"Crying won't work! Shouldn't you be used to water by now, Sylv?"

"Kyuuuuu..." Sylvie finally escaped from my grasp and scurried out of the shower, still dripping.

"Haa..." I shook my head as I finished washing up by myself.

Wearing nothing but a simple t-shirt and pants, I took one last look at the room I had been living in for the past few months, imprinting the image. I put on my glove and ring, packing the coat and mask along with a few other necessities into my bag. I strapped both Dawn's Ballad and my short sword to my waist before walking out.

"Trust in Jasmine when things get rough. She may be the youngest but don't doubt her strength and experience as an adventurer," my father advised as he pulled me into one last—firm—hug.

"Why are Brother and Sylvie leaving? No! Stay here!" My sister was now struck with realization that I wouldn't be home for a while. She was clutching my waist and refused to let go as she used the weight of her body to anchor me down.

"Honey, your brother will be back, okay?" My mother attempted to console her.

"Nonononono! Stay!" my sister demanded. She had refused to listen to excuses and began shouting with tear-filled eyes.

Kneeling down, I wrapped Ellie in my arms as I patted her back. "I know you're a big girl now. Can you protect Mom and Dad while I'm gone for a bit, Ellie?"

"UUuuu...hic...I can protect them..." she replied in a muffled voice, burying her head into my shoulder.

Letting go of her, I studied my baby sister's face, wiping the tears streaming down her cheeks.

"Atta girl. Your big brother is going to be gone for a little bit but I'll be back. I feel a lot better that we have someone strong like my little sister here to protect the house."

"Yes!" she seconded eagerly, her eyes filled with a newfound determination.

Patting her head, I gave Mother and Father one last hug.

"We'll miss you. Don't forget to keep the ring on your finger, okay?" My mother squeezed me tightly.

"Stay safe and know your limits, Arthur." Father placed a hand on my shoulder and stared at me, waiting for a response.

Know my limits, I repeated to myself, giving my father a firm nod.

After the partings were finished, I made my way down the front stairs to where Jasmine had been waiting.

I waved them one last goodbye, gesturing to my sister, who was waving both her hands as she bit her lips to keep from crying, to cheer up.

"Let's go, Jasmine," I declared while putting on the mask and coat.

She replied with a terse nod as we began heading downtown to the Adventurer's Guild Hall.

The Guild Hall was not what I had expected it to be. A vivid image of a place filled with thugs seated around wooden tables downing beer was what I envisioned. Instead, it was a building filled with prestige and luxury. A marble structure towered over us like a sacred museum. Once inside, it was clear the amount of work that had been put into the intricately designed interior. There were tables made from metal where I could see other adventurers giving us a passing glance. The whole place had an ambience of extravagance that didn't suit me, much less some of the barbarian-looking adventurers here, but I simply continued my stride.

"Welcome! How may I help the two of you?" The female receptionist's rehearsed smile gleamed a pearly white.

Before I had the chance to reply, Jasmine slid a piece of parchment towards the woman.

"I would like to sponsor him for a rank examination." Her face remained expressionless as she said curtly.

"Y-Yes! I understand," the receptionist answered, nodding her head fervently as she handed back the piece of paper. "Please, come over this way."

Getting up from her seat, the women opened the door beside us from the other side. As we entered, I couldn't help but notice the hushed murmurs around us.

“Oy, there’s someone taking a rank examination,” someone whispered.

“It’s just a girl and some masked midget, though,” another hoarse voice mocked blatantly.

I held in any questions I had and simply followed the clerk in silence. Passing through the door, we were led past the row of seats behind the glass counter where the receptionists were stationed and into a small room.

The office was minimally decorated with two leather couches positioned to face each other. On the far end of the room was a dark, wooden desk facing the door; a slender man was seated behind the pile of neatly-stacked papers, jotting down something with a quilted pen.

Roused by the sound of his office door being opened, the man looked up to reveal a sharp and angular face. The head of black hair I had been staring at was parted down the center and reached just past his thin neck. Behind his rimless and thick glasses were a pair of sharp eyes that regarded us intently.

“A-Class Adventurer, Jasmine Flamesworth has requested this...” the clerk’s voice trailed off as she eyed me cautiously. “...gentleman to be taken in for a rank examination.”

“Yes, I’m quite aware of who Miss Flamesworth is. You may wait outside, Mary.” The slender man waved her away as he stood up from his seat. “Miss Flamesworth, how are you these days? I met with your father not too long ago.”

Jasmine simply gave a terse nod, that barely resembled a bow, as the man approached us. Her expression had gotten sharper since coming into this room, but at the mention of her father, Jasmine’s hands clenched into fists.

“Anyway, it is a pleasure to meet you.” The man shifted his attention to me, finally acknowledging my presence. “My name is Kaspian Bladeheart, and I am in charge of this branch. I take it that you must have some sort of close relationship with Miss Flamesworth. Is there a name I can address you by?” His gaze darted up and down as he quickly assessed me.

“Kuu!” Sylvie answered in my stead.

I had made Sylvie transform back into her original form during my time as an adventurer so her horns protruded and her red spikes were visible.

“I go by Note,” I answered gruffly. The name didn’t mean much and was made fairly mindlessly based on the blue streak that went through the left eye slit; it had reminded me of a single half note.

Kaspian’s eyes widened in surprise but he quickly recovered, responding with a casual smile. Other than that, seeing a mana beast didn’t seem to surprise him, which I assumed was because of his line of work. “Yes! Well... Mr. Note, we will proceed with Miss Flamesworth here as your sponsor. Do you know how this will work?”

Shaking my head, I let him explain. “An Adventurer of B-class or higher has the right to sponsor a new adventurer for an examination. Depending on how well you do, this exam will give you the opportunity to be placed into a suitable rank. This way, you can avoid the needless struggles of starting from the very beginning. The rank exam will consist of only a practical portion. Now, judging by your weapons, I can

assume that you are either a fighter or augments, yes?" He looked quizzically at the black stick tied to my waist below my short sword.

"Yes."

"Okay! Usually, there would be a quick application along with an inspection of your mana core before the exam but since it is Miss Flamesworth here sponsoring you, I will waive that," he continued as he opened another door at the far end of his office. "Mary, take these two to the examination hall."

"Y-Yes!" The receptionist, who had been waiting outside the room, entered hastily and led us toward the back door. "Please, Mr. Note, Miss Flamesworth, right this way."

I peered at Jasmine through my mask as we made our way down the long corridor. Was this the reason why she wanted to be the one to follow me? The Flamesworth House was mentioned with a fair degree of respect, but what exactly was the Flamesworth House?

I was forced to squint as my eyes tried to adjust to the sudden change in brightness as we exited out of the dark passage. As the blinding glow subsided, I was able to make out the details of the hall we were in. The brightly lit area was an indoor, dirt-floored arena with standard theater seats that appeared more like exaggerated stairs. While most of the seats were empty except for the scattered ten or so people, there was a tense atmosphere as everyone's eyes focused on the two people at the center of the arena.

"Please, follow me to your seats. There are quite a number of examinees today so if you would remain seated until the examiner calls your name, it'll really help speed up the process." The receptionist gave us one last, quick, bow before scurrying back down the rows of stone seats.

Placing Sylvie between Jasmine and me, I leaned forward to get a better view of the two fighters about to duel. Jasmine simply leaned back in apathy with her legs crossed.

"Haht!" the larger, bald man roared as he swung down his polearm. It was obvious that he was at a disadvantage against his opponent. The man he was fighting was of average build with short black hair and a jagged scar that ran down his cheek, but he was easily dodging all of the bald man's wide swings.

The scarred fighter had an apathetic expression much like the one Jasmine had. He didn't even bother using the broadsword he had in his right hand as he continued weaving around his bald opponent's brash attacks.

Face red in frustration, the bald fighter bellowed, "Take this!" The fact that he had announced his next attack meant that he was either confident or he was simply an amateur. In this case, it seemed to be the latter.

The polearm he had brought up high above his head suddenly began glowing a dim orange as a heat wave surrounded his weapon. The scarred man's expression changed from boredom to mild surprise.

"Hell Smash!" the bald man roared as he hacked down. Just like how conjurers chanted spells to focus their intent, many augmenters also chose to do something similar, like vocalizing the name of their attack. However, for such a simple move, it seemed excessive.

Even from up here, I could make out the scarred man's derisive sigh as he simply held up his broadsword to take on the attack.

The sharp ring of metal meeting metal echoed throughout the arena. However, the sight of the polearm spinning up high in the air made it fairly easy to determine who the winner of the exchange was.

The large cueball of a man was gawking down at his empty hands, apparently surprised that his ace attack was so easily dealt with.

"Your skills as a polearm wielder is nonexistent and your battle senses are lousy... and that's me being nice. You depend too much on physical strength compared to your mana reinforcement, which throws your attack's balance off. It says you've just turned thirty-five but you're now only at the dark orange stage. I would normally put someone of your caliber at E-class but seeing how you have a fire affinity, if that little heater move you just did can even be called fire, I'll pass you as a D-class...barely." The scarred examiner's assessment was curt and to the point, but I couldn't have agreed more with him.

"Next! Diane Whitehall!" the scarred man bellowed as the bald examinee dispiritingly made his way back to his seat, picking up his polearm along the way.

"Yes! Coming!" A woman on the other side of the stadium scampered down the rows of seats, nearly stumbling along the way.

She was a freckled girl that looked to be well into her teens. She had her curly brown hair tied back and was wearing a standard conjurer's robe that looked more like a fancy bathrobe. She fumbled to get her wand out of her belt, but managed to get in position without dropping it.

Snickers and giggles spread through the arena from the scarce audience, shrinking the girl—Diane—even more so in embarrassment.

"What a waste of time. Just fail this girl," a boy's voice to my left caught my attention just in time for me to see him mockingly shake his head.

The boy didn't look much older than me, which surprised me. I hadn't expected there to be someone so young trying to become an adventurer. While he was also wearing a conjurer's robe, it was on a different level; it really did make Diane's robe look like a bathrobe in comparison. With his embellishments and other fineries, it was apparent that he was a noble. With medium-length blond hair that covered his ears and was trimmed to set just above his dull, green eyes, it was easy to tell that he was an attractive boy. By the permanent smirk plastered onto his face and the way he lifted his chin just a tad so he was always looking down at everything, I'm sure he thought of himself as a superstar.

However, what caught my eyes was the polished white, wooden staff that was by the boy's side. Embedded at the very top of the staff was a large ruby-colored gem that sparkled in the stadium lights.

He was a fine example of someone that rubbed me the wrong way, so I chose to turn my attention back to the stage.

The scarred examiner that had examined the bald augmenter was sitting down, replaced by a woman. The person, who I assumed was the conjurer's examiner, wore a conjurer's hat in the shape of a large cone that set a shadow covering most of her face.

Tilting her hat back, I was able to see the instructor's pale face. Her thin eyes darted around at the audience before she let out a loud cough to have everyone settle down.

"Ahem! Diane Whitehall, age eighteen, a conjurer at the solid orange stage with a single specialization in water. Let us begin." The female examiner threw the notepad towards the scarred examiner and held up her grey staff.

Once a conjurer had reached the orange stage, it was apparent where his or her specialty lied. Instead of wasting time trying to be adept at all four elements, it was much more efficient to focus solely on the element of their highest affinity. Single specialization, in her case, meant that she relied primarily on water spells. Dual specialization and up, there would be a strict test to see if you really were adept at two elements.

Instantly, the freckled examinee murmured a spell, conjuring a bubble of water to surround her.

The basics of battling as a conjurer was setting up defensive measures. They did this since most weren't proficient in reinforcing their bodies with mana.

Diane's examiner, however, didn't cast a defensive spell but instead chose to go on the offensive.

"Sandstorm!" the pale examiner shouted as a gale of sand whirled around the freckled girl and her defensive water bubble.

The gust of sand merged with the water, turning Diane's defensive spell into a large orb of mud.

"Release!" The mud bubble burst at the examinee's command. Jumping back, she muttered another spell while a pressured ball of water began forming at the tip of her wand.

[Aqua Cannon]

The sphere of water burst out in a blazing speed towards the pale examiner.

Rather than defending against the spell, the examiner nimbly dodged the water sphere. Thinking back, I had realized that this was the first time watching a duel between two conjurers. This mock fight would be a good way to study the differences in fighting styles between long range conjurers and melee augmenters.

"BURST!" the freckled teen screamed while she swung her wand down. The condensed ball of water exploded just as it zipped past the examiner, filling the stadium in a cloud of dust.

The noble brat that was mocking the girl earlier was shaking his head in disdain.

"She's not bad," Jasmine mumbled beside me.

The small dust cloud that covered the instructor from view began clearing up to reveal that she wasn't there.

Suddenly, the examiner emerged up from the ground behind Diane, and her staff lightly thumped the top of the examinee's head.

"Eek!" Diane jumped forward in surprise.

"I must say, your control is quite decent, Miss Whitehall. You were a little overconfident in your last spell chain, not preparing any defensive measures, but overall, the efficiency in mana control and cast speed was good. C-class!"

Diane let out a sigh of relief. Being a C-class adventurer at her age was a feat she could be proud of.

"Next! Elijah Knight!" The Conjurer examiner announced.

"Here..." A couple rows away to my right, a boy that looked even younger than the blonde noble, stood up. He looked somewhat unapproachable, with short-trim jet-black hair that came down to cover half of his forehead. He had a very serious expression underneath his framed glasses that made him look more mature than his actual age. The boy wore a simple beige long-sleeve and black pants and didn't have any sort of weapons on him. I half-expected him to be an augmenter but the fact that the examiner didn't switch out meant otherwise.

Suddenly, a clerk that was keeping notes at the side ran up to the examiner and whispered something into her ear.

The pale-faced examiner's thin eyes widened before quickly regaining her composure.

"Elijah Knight, age ten. I have been just notified of your special status. As of now, you are a B-class adventurer."

B-class at his age and he didn't even need to get tested?

I could see looks of disbelief on everyone's faces. Even the augmenter examiner's face was in surprise as he craned his neck to get a better view of the boy in question.

The solemn boy merely made a small bow and sat back down without a word.

"Next! Lucas Wykes!" the examiner continued.

"Hmph! Guess it's finally my turn!" The blond-haired noble boy jumped up from his seated position and leisurely made his way down to the stage, staff in hand.

The examiner looked down at her notes but this time, her voice sounded evidently surprised. "Lucas Wykes, 11 years old. Conjurer at the.... light orange stage! Single specialization in fire."

What? He's already at the light orange stage? How is that even possible?

Without even bowing, Lucas leaned lazily against his staff.

"Let us begin," the examiner declared, obviously a bit vexed by the boy's lack of respect.

At her signal, Lucas immediately jumped back as he chanted a spell. "Arise, my protector!"

[Flame Guardian]

A pillar of fire erupted in front of him, fading to reveal a two-meter tall humanoid made of flames.

"Looks like we have a special little talent today. As expected of someone from the Wykes Family," the augmenter examiner whistled in awe.

The flame guardian sprinted towards the examiner, leaving smoldering footprints in its path as Lucas started to cast another spell.

So he does have some skill to back up his ego.

The female examiner was obviously a bit impressed but she responded skillfully with a wave of her grey staff and a few words to ignite her spell.

[Earth Tomb]

Three triangular planes of solid earth shot up from the ground, trapping the fire guardian inside a pyramid of rock.

It was a good response. The flame guardian would naturally disappear once it used up the limited amount of oxygen inside the tomb.

Lucas chortled in response, however, as he finished his chant. "Too late, Miss Examiner."

[Ember Wisps]

The ruby stone embedded on his staff shined a dazzling orange as a spark burst up in the air. The seemingly harmless spark exploded like a firework, separating into dozens of small, floating tendrils of fire. The tendrils remained afloat all around the stage, surrounding the both of them.

"The boy is good," Jasmine complimented, giving a rare sign of approval.

The examiner's face turned serious now.

I was a little confused on the purpose of those floating embers, but my question was soon answered.

"Expulsion!" Lucas raised his staff above his head as he continued dashing backwards.

Suddenly, the dozens of fire tendrils radiated a bright red before shooting out beams of fire at the examiner.

The examiner aimed her staff down at the ground below her as she calmly continued chanting. The surface around her glimmered a bright yellow as multiple pieces of earth began emerging from the ground.

[Stone Shard Field]

The glowing rocks darted into formation to block the lasers of flame. Only, it didn't just block the lasers, but redirected them towards Lucas.

"Release!" Lucas paled as he desperately yelled. The wisps in the air disappeared but the flames that were already shot out were still heading towards him.

Pointing his huge staff at the multiple trails of flames rapidly approaching him, he let out another spell.

[Fire Twister]

A cyclone of fire just large enough to surround him generated from the ground. The trails of flame got caught up in the vortex of the fire tornado, merging into it.

“Pierce,” the examiner commanded with a fluid motion. The rock shards that had redirected the flames wobbled before they shot forward at the flame tornado Lucas was hiding within. The large shards of rock bulleted through the fire tornado, shredding it out of existence. The shards stopped just short of the angry but trembling Lucas, who was shielding himself with his staff held in front of him.

“How dare you! This preposterous lack of decency for a mere rank exam should be recorded and dealt with accordingly!” Lucas cried out with baleful eyes. His once creamy complexion were a few shades lighter as a layer of sweat covered his body.

“Calm yourself, Mr. Wykes. I have enough control to keep myself from skewering arrogant little children,” the examiner calmly reassured, leaving Lucas to silently utter curses at the woman.

“Your control and creativity in the combinations of your spells are excellent. As long as you stay cautious and know your limits, you will have a great future ahead of you, Mr. Wykes. I think it is safe to say that you can be placed into B-class. Do you agree, George?” She turned to the augmenters’ examiner.

He gave a simple shrug in response, indicating he had no problems with it.

Whatever wrongful actions Lucas had accused the examiner of seemed to have disappeared into thin air as Lucas, once again, wore a smug grin at the final outcome.

“Woah!”

“Another little monster!”

“D**n, I want to just go home!”

“What is with today’s crowd?”

The few members of the audience all cried out and complained in envy, as some of the other audience members that have already taken the exam murmured excitedly amongst their peers.

“What did you blundering apes expect? Did you guys think I was on your level?” Lucas taunted aloud as he dusted off his robe.

He made his way back to his seat before the examiner, who wasn’t even tired, switched places with the augmenting examiner named George.

The scarred man got up, stretching his body like a lazy cat. Casually high-fiving the other examiner as he walked past her, he stared at his notes.

“Next examinee, Note! Please come down!” he bellowed without looking up.

Jasmine placed a hand on my shoulder. “Good luck.”

Giving a firm nod in response, I walked down the steps, leaving the worried Sylvie in Jasmine’s care.

“It seems you’re here to be tested under special conditions, seeing as there isn’t any information here written about you. Okay! Let’s see what you’re made of.” George regarded me with a curious stare, trying to look through my mask’s eye slit to see who I was.

The examiner smoothly unsheathed his sword, as did I.

“Begin!” he announced while lunging at me. The thrust was aimed directly at my head, most likely intended to scare me.

Instead of dodging back or ducking, I faced the incoming tip of the sword and took a step forward, willing mana into my legs. Tilting my head just enough for the flat of the blade to graze harmlessly past my mask, I brought my sword up in one, swift motion.

George’s sharp eyes widened by my counter as he desperately retracted in hopes to make it in time to block my swing, but the tip of my sword was already pressed against the man’s throat. The examiner immediately stopped, afraid that any sudden movement and my blade might actually embed itself into his neck, regardless of mana reinforcement.

“Enough,” a voice interrupted. “Stand down, George. I’ll be the one to test this particular examinee.”

Turning my head, I saw the thin, bespectacled man named Kaspian walking toward us from the corridor Jasmine and I had come in from.

“S-Sir? You will be personally examining this participant?” George backed away from my blade as casually as possible, but a bead of blood rolled down his neck.

“I apologize if this sounds presumptuous, but is there really a need for an AA-class to lower himself to test an examinee? I will be more than enough to assess this applicant!” he continued, quickly wiping the blood off with his hand.

Kaspian’s gaze lowered to George’s neck, silencing the examiner. The man, regardless of what he assumed was a simple blunder on his part, was visibly baffled by the fact that the head of this branch would be the one to test me.

It would be a lie to say I wasn’t surprised as well. Someone classified as an AA-class adventurer was at a much higher level of strength compared to an A-class. As the class ranks increased, each jump was exponential, meaning that compared to D-class to C-class, the jump from A-class to AA-class was uncomparable. Being an AA-class adventurer signified that you had the strength of ten A-class adventurers, and that was just a rough estimate.

He should be on a whole other tier of strength compared to other humans. I was curious as to what stage his mana core was, but there was no way for me to see without him finding out.

“His sponsor has deep ties with me so I feel obligated to test him personally,” he chuckled as his right hand reached towards a thin rapier on his waist.

Waving away George, the two of us stood at the center of the dirt arena.

“Let us begin.”

The Beginning After The End – Chapter 29: Changes In Dicathen

I held my shortsword just above my waist, ready to attack or defend. The array of sounds that filled the arena were soon drowned out as my focus centered solely on the man standing in front of me.

The man named Kaspian, the one in charge of the biggest Guild Halls, held the menacing rapier lightly with his right hand. He stood upright, making figure eights with the tip of his blade while letting out a

little hum. Yet, he had no openings. The baleful pressure of his bloodlust was blatantly let loose as he dared to let out an innocent smile.

Memories of fighting inside the dueling arena in my previous world flashed to mind as the air grew tense between us. My focus sharpened to their limits. The only sounds that came through my ears were those made by Kaspian: his blade whistling in the air, the crinkled sounds of his thin clothes, and the controlled breaths he took. My body screamed to take caution against this man.

I could feel my hands tremble ever so slightly, not from apprehension, but from excitement. I didn't think I'd find an opponent of this caliber so soon. This battle wasn't to the death but I knew it would be different from the spars I had with Grandpa Virion back in Elenoir.

"I knew from first glance that you would have to be assessed in a different manner. I hope you don't take this... special treatment to heart," Kaspian commented as he lowered his stance.

In that brief moment, I analyzed every piece of useful information that I could about this man. His reach was longer than mine by about a foot, while his stance indicated that he primarily relied on thrusts rather than swings. Just from the amount of mana I could sense swirling near him, it was safe to assume that he wouldn't make any careless mistakes.

"Please prepare yourself. I wouldn't want the person Miss Flamesworth sponsored to lose too quickly."

He sprang forward, leaving a trail of dust behind him as he closed the gap between us. In one fluid motion, he lunged his rapier like a coiled spring, using the momentum of his initial step.

I twisted my head to avoid the stab, but a few strands of my hair were cut off.

"Excellent dodge," he mused, retracting his rapier in preparation for his next attack.

Immediately following up with an angled lunge, I held up my scabbard. A sharp thud echoed throughout the arena from the clash and I was thrown off-balance. It seemed like I was still unable to use the full extent of my previous knowledge in swordsmanship with this undeveloped body.

I recovered from this setback by pivoting myself, using the momentum from his attack to whirl my lacking body to generate a powerful swing.

Kaspian leaned back just moments before my sword reached his head, but a thin red line appeared across the tip of his nose.

His thin eyes widened in surprise but he recovered instantly. I took advantage of that split second, bringing my sword back to produce a sharp, upward swipe at his unguarded legs.

My blade reflected the arena lights, producing a silver arc as it whizzed through the air.

However, my opponent was able to reposition his sword to defend against my swing. The sharp ring of metal on metal made both Kaspian and I cringe. The both of us seemed to have had the same intent as we both used the opportunity to gain distance. Only a handful of seconds passed during the deadly exchange, but each of us came out with only minor injuries. I switched my sword arm since the impact of our last blow produced a sharp vibration that made my right hand tremble.

The realization that I was still unaccustomed to fighting in this body was all too apparent as I coaxed my hand.

"I must apologize for underestimating you. I shall be a bit more serious now." Kaspian's voice was calm but his face expressed a certain degree of seriousness that wasn't there before.

His sharp eyes gleamed with a powerful killing intent that could only be present in someone who had years of fighting under his belt. His rapier was aimed toward me, but as he brought it closer toward him, the blade began glowing with a silvery hue.

"Ha!" Letting out a sharp breath, he thrust out his rapier, piercing the air in front of him.

The hairs on the back of my neck rose as my body screamed for me to run away. I instinctively pivoted myself away from where my opponent had lined his attack. A sharp pain burst from my shoulder as hot blood seeped into the sleeve of my robe...

"Seems like Miss Flamesworth has picked up someone worthwhile after all," Kaspian acknowledged.

As far as I was concerned, this wasn't some assessment anymore. Whether he had expected me to dodge or not, he had aimed for my heart.

Would I have been able to defeat him easily if I had the body of my past life? I wasn't sure. There were too many factors that played into this; the quality of our swords, the use of long range mana manipulation that didn't exist in my old world...

Taking a moment to charge his next attack, he let out two more consecutive thrusts, but I knew what to expect.

He was creating sharp bullets of wind, which were near-invisible. However, it didn't mean that they were impossible to dodge. By the timing of the thrust to when it had reached my arm from his previous attack, I was able to gauge the speed the spell travelled.

The spell travelled in a straight path based on the direction of his jab, so while the speed of the spell was frightening, there were holes to take advantage of.

I ducked underneath the first bullet of wind as it barely grazed my hair. I parried the second bullet with the flat of my blade, redirecting his spell away from me. Immediately after, I willed mana into my legs and dashed toward Kaspian.

I had to shorten the distance between us now that I knew he had a long range spell at his disposal, but I knew even in terms of melee combat, it would be a hard battle.

I had a body that was more than several inches shorter than what I had been used to when sword fighting and a much smaller pool of mana to utilize. So even with the assimilation of Sylvia's dragon will making my body tougher, I didn't have that much of an advantage against a veteran fighter with a body enhanced with mana.

The only advantage I had was the fact that Kaspian didn't know what I had up my sleeve.

Focusing mana into my free hand, I ran my fingers down the blade of my sword, imbuing it with fire. Approaching him, I swung down to release an arc of fiery red.

I could see the concentration on Kaspian's face as he willed more mana into his rapier until it, once again, glowed in a silvery white. He fanned away the flames with a powerful swing, leaving an ever-so-slight window for me to take advantage of.

Gathering mana into the sole of my left foot, I molded the spell to manifest into the proper form.

[Piston Stamp]

A succession of fiery explosion erupted underneath my foot, propelling me directly beside Kaspian.

"How—" was all he could manage. His mouth agape, his rapier was still held up from his defense against my previous attack that I had used as a feint.

My position wasn't optimal; I had launched myself a foot more than I had wanted to, but it was enough.

Without enough time to form a proper spell, I simply strengthened my body with mana as I thrust my sword forward.

However, even as the distance between my blade and Kaspian shortened, I could make out the words that the Guild Hall manager was chanting. "Gather and unleash!"

[Gale's Vortex]

I was barely able to rescind my attack and jump away as an intense swirl of airstream burst out from Kaspian, surrounding him in a protective twister.

The Guild Hall manager was hidden from view within the twister of wind and debris, allowing me some time to prepare for his next attack.

The spell was released to reveal Kaspian, sweating and panting, with his sword arm tucked closely to his side like a snake about to lash out; his left arm was stretched out—palms open—aimed directly at me .

He was obviously chanting as the blade of his rapier began glowing even brighter in silver.

"Pierce those who stand against me!" he roared as his rapier disappeared into a blur of countless thrusts.

[Skyfall Torrent]

This was just an exam, right? Was he actually trying to kill me?

"Screw this," I muttered to myself as I concentrated the last of my remaining mana deep into the sensory and motor neurons in my body.

[Thunderclap Impulse]

One of the few techniques I had managed to develop using knowledge from my previous world while training with Grandpa Virion. A technique that used lightning affinity mana to run currents of electricity throughout my nerves, quickening my reflexes to a superhuman extent. The average human had a reaction time of around 0.3 seconds, but there were trained fighters that could get it down to 0.2 or even 0.15 seconds.

Using Thunderclap Impulse, my reaction time was able to shorten to about 0.05 for a brief amount of time.

My pupils contracted as the hairs on my skin stood up on end due to the electric currents.

I could hear the sharp whispers of the air bullets shooting towards me as I readied myself to dodge them.

“Release!” Kaspian screamed.

The torrent of air bullets suddenly dissipated, rendering his spell to a harmless draft of wind.

“I may have gotten a bit carried away with testing your limits,” he apologized, sheathing his sword. The Guild Hall manager immediately turned away and headed toward the exit as I released my spell as well.

“From the fact that you were so adamantly withholding your full abilities until the end, I can only assume that you wish to be placed at a lower rank,” he said, continuing his stride without turning his back. “Note. B-class.”

“Just before disappearing into the passageway he had come from, Kaspian turned his head and looked me in the eye, one of the lenses on his glasses cracked. “I’m sure you have no problem with this?”

I merely nodded my head in agreement, watching him walk out of sight down the dark corridor.

“That was the last examination for today! Please go to the front desk to receive your adventurer’s card. Everyone is dismissed!” the augmenter examiner shouted out as he and the other examiner both rushed after their boss.

KASPIAN BLADEHEART’S POV:

I arrived at my desk and before I even have the chance to take a seat, the two examiners in charge of today’s placements bombarded me with questions.

“George, Emily, take a seat and don’t talk all at once,” I sighed, sinking heavily into my chair.

“Sir! What was with today’s examinees?” George immediately shouted out. “Three B-class adventurers right off the bat in a day? This kind of situation is unheard of. Not to mention that two of them were kids! Light orange at the age of eleven... has that ever occurred amongst humans?”

Emily nodded fervidly in agreement.

“Do you remember what happened half a year ago here in Xyrus?” I asked.

“Around six months ago should’ve been the time when the first tournament amongst the three races took place, right?” Emily answered.

“Yes. The Adventurer Guild workers will all know soon, so there isn’t much of a point in hiding this; I was just notified of this a couple of weeks ago as well. The ban on elves and dwarves becoming adventurers has been lifted and today’s batch included some of the representative examinees.” I pulled out a thin file from my desk drawer.

“S-Sir, do you mean to say that all three of them were either dwarves or elves?” George’s eyes had widened to a frightening degree as he expressed his shock.

“Lucas Wykes is a half-elf that has been residing in the Kingdom of Sapin. The information on his birth is classified but if I had to guess, he was probably a product of an elf slave. The Wykes Family has always had a bad reputation for dabbling in nefarious ways to breed better mages for their house. He’s an unusual case, though, being able to be so adept in flame affinity, despite his elf lineage. He awakened at the age of eight, which is fast, even amongst elf standards, and was sent here for a sort of trial run. The Wykes no doubt expended a lot of money into buying beast cores and other resources to quicken his growth.” I flipped to the next page.

“Elijah Knight. He’s quite the mystery. According to the file, his origin is unknown. He was, however, raised amongst dwarves at a young age. He was sent as one of the first representatives from the Kingdom of Darv to assimilate into the human kingdom.”

“How come he wasn’t tested, Sir? The clerk only told me to just put him into B-class,” Emily asked, her voice higher than usual from excitement.

“Elijah awakened a few months ago, so he’s only now barely reached the dark-red stage. As for why he was allowed to be a B-class adventurer, it probably has to do with the person backing him up. I don’t have any say in his case, so we can only let him be. I’m curious as to what his abilities are, though.” I shook my head, putting down his file.

“As for that masked augments from today, to be honest, I have no idea who he is. He wasn’t recorded as any of the representatives on the list. I was simply curious as to what kind of person Miss Flamesworth would be willing to sponsor.”

“Flamesworth...as in that Flamesworth House? The famous house that is known for birthing the strongest fire attribute mages?”

I put away the file and regarded them seriously, adjusting my glasses. “I told you all of this because you will find out soon anyway. However, I trust that you guys will refrain from telling others until the announcement is officially made across the country?”

With fervent nods from both of them, I dismissed my two employees.

I was left to ponder over today’s events.

That masked augments. His techniques were not the standard skills that most fire attribute mages used. Even his style with the sword... it was something that made me shiver.

Regardless of all this, however, I couldn’t help but get a sense that his movements were off somehow. Based on the movements that came off as awkward at times, it felt like he was somehow restrained, or even uncomfortable with his own body.

I dismissed my needless thoughts and began going over the pile of unread documents.

I couldn’t help but grin to myself; this continent was changing. There would be a lot more interesting events happening from now on.

ARTHUR LEYWIN’S POV:

The same receptionist that had led us to the examination site handed me my bronze-colored adventurer's card at the front desk.

From E-class to B-class, the card was a copper color, while starting from A-class, it would change to silver, then gold for AA class, then white for S class.

"Do you have a close relationship with Kaspian, Jasmine?" I asked after putting away my card, Sylvie asleep on my head.

"He's an acquaintance of my father," she said simply with a cold chill to her voice.

I didn't dig for any further answers. She obviously didn't have any positive feelings regarding the man. Changing the subject, I asked my adventuring partner, "So what should we do next?"

She pondered for a bit.

There were several options. We could do missions that were at, or below, our ranks. These missions included a variety of tasks, from guarding to acquiring specific items. We could also transport ourselves to the Beast Glades and explore while hunting down mana beasts. Or...

"Dungeon-exploring," Jasmine answered, a faint smile forming on her face.

The Beginning After The End – Chapter 30: Sword and Body

Sylvie let out an excited chirp at the idea of exploring a dungeon but I remained silent, staring at the two swords strapped to the back of my waist.

Today's battle with Kaspian confirmed a lot of things for me. I'd spent too much time adjusting to and learning this world's magic system. Assimilating with Sylvia's Beast Will, honing my Lightning and Ice Attribute techniques along with all of the other elements. I had been so engrossed in the fact that this world made it capable of actually producing physical manifestations of elements that I neglected my foundations, the very thing I was best at, which was physical combat.

In my past life, I had used the simplest techniques to utilize the most of my meager ki pool. With that and my sword, I had been able to rise to the top. Dicathen offered so many more possibilities but if I was to truly excel and become the best in this world, I was going to have to not only use my gifts in this life, but my experiences from my previous life.

In the midst of my thoughts, I felt someone bump past my shoulder. Looking up, I caught sight of the blond noble named Lucas strutting past me amongst his entourage of guards and servants.

"You're not bad for an augmenter, but that's all you are. Don't get c***y because we happen to be in the same class. Even in the same ranks there are levels, and you would be at the bottom. Know your place, commoner!" Lucas spat venomously. The blond boy let out a smirk while intentionally leaning his head back so he could look down on me. The fact that his height was a fair bit shorter than mine just made him look silly.

What cliché behavior for an annoying side character.

Not bothering to argue with him, I just faced back to Jasmine. "Let's go to the portal."

Crossing through the teleportation gate, my senses jolted from the scenery. The City of Xyrus had the most teleportation gates among the cities since they were the only way one could enter it, it being a floating city and all. The one we crossed led us directly to the front entrance of the area known as the Beast Glades.

The chirps of birds, occasional cries and roars of beasts, and the constant sound of water flowing filling the background all created an enticing symphony of nature. The sight of tall trees and numerous hills covered in various plants and shrubs made it hard to believe that this beautiful landscape was filled with magical beasts capable of killing even the strongest mages. However, because of abundances of natural resources on the outskirts, it was mostly only the lower rank beasts that inhabited this area. The deeper an adventurer traversed, the more mysterious and treacherous the landscape turned, filled with the lairs of powerful beasts that have amassed their treasures and power in the solitudes of unexplored regions in the Beast Glades.

I took a sip of the crisp air as Jasmine arrived behind me through the teleportation gate when, suddenly, Sylvie hopped off my head and scurried off.

“Wait, Sylv! Where are you going?” I called after her, dumbfounded.

Sylvie transmitted a vague response; I could feel her emotions of excitement as she sent out thoughts about her plans to train as well.

The fact that my bond had never left my side ever since she had hatched until now filled me with unease, but after realizing that I was able to sense her whereabouts, I calmed down.

“She’ll be okay. Mana beasts have a natural instinct to grow stronger. She must’ve felt very suffocated being in a sheltered environment all of her life,” Jasmine explained, walking next to me.

Putting her hand on my shoulder, she signaled for us to start moving. “There’s a place I wish to visit first before going to a dungeon. We have to hurry though; it gets a little more dangerous at night.”

Willing mana into her body, Jasmine bolted off into the distance, her wind attribute mana propelling her even faster.

I followed after her, forming two gales of wind below my feet as I dashed after her. I made sure to keep tabs on Sylvie but it wasn’t much of a problem since both she and I were mentally linked. Even as the distance grew between us, the connection remained strong, and I was able to sense that Sylvie was catching small prey, her ecstatic mood affecting me as well.

The journey lasted a few hours and it began to grow dark. The only reason I had been able to keep up with Jasmine, even when she was at dark yellow stage, was thanks to the use of mana rotation throughout the way. This skill had become almost second nature to me now as I utilized it unconsciously whenever I exerted mana.

By late evening, we had cleared through a dense forest and arrived at a small clearing. Surrounded by trees, there was a small field of grass with a stream of clear water flowing through it.

“We’ll camp out here for a few days,” Jasmine announced as she set down her bag and took out a couple of items.

“Weren’t we going to a dungeon right away?” I set down my bag as well.

She simply shook her head, picking up a few branches of wood and gathering them together.

I went into the forest, finding some decent-sized branches to make a fire with. After a bit, we had a fire crackling and popping in the middle of our camp. Making myself comfortable, I removed my mask and sat silently by her, next to the fire.

Trying to break the silence, I asked Jasmine, “What made you want to become an adventurer?”

“...”

Her gaze never left the fire and after a few minutes of more awkward silence, I just stared back at the flame, assuming she didn’t want to answer.

“I wanted to get away from my family.” I almost missed what she said from how quietly she spoke amidst the wood of the fire snapping fiercely.

“I see... were you on bad terms with your family?” I responded, my eyes focused on the fire.

“...”

“The Flamesworth House was a major contributor to the war against the elves. Our house has provided many powerful mages, both conjurers and augments. Our lineage in the fire attribute element was second to none. We took great pride in this, because fire is considered to be the most powerful of the elements,” she stated monotonously.

Despite her short sentences, this had been the most Jasmine had talked in one sitting.

“But Jasmine, aren’t you a...” I looked up at her as she nodded in response.

“Since early on, when I had first awakened and started training, my family tried to test my mana for fire affinity. I went through various tests so they could see how my mana was exerted and how it flowed through my mana channels.” She took a pause and poked at the fire before continuing on. “When it was made clear that I had no aptitude for the fire attribute, my family regarded me as lesser.”

“...”

I didn’t know how to respond to her. For the first time, the always aloof and cold Jasmine seemed...vulnerable.

“I’m sorry for what happened...” was the only response I managed to utter.

Shaking her head, she gave me a faint smile. “The Twin Horns have treated me well and I don’t dislike what I am.”

I glanced at her palm as Jasmine formed a small swirl of wind, different emotions running through her face as she peered at her hand.

This world was a place of discrimination and classification. The hierarchical roots imbedded into this land would never truly disappear. Normal humans were considered second-rate people, while even amongst mages, augmenters were discriminated against by conjurers. It went further than that where, unless one was a deviant or a dual element specialist, some elements were considered “higher class” than others.

Being born from a family of powerful fire attribute mages, she was discarded as inferior because of the elemental attribute she had; something that most mages would kill to acquire. She was a dark yellow augmenter skilled in fighting and mana manipulation at the ripe age of 24. Many would consider her a genius but from the standards she grew up with, she considered herself lesser.

We placed more wood to last through the coldest parts of the night and laid out our sleeping bags a few feet away so we could still feel the heat.

Laying down, I pried into my mind to feel Sylvie’s presence. She was a good distance away but I could tell she was safe. She sent me a thought of confirmation, saying not to worry and that I should stay safe as well.

Eyes closed, I waited to drift off when I heard Jasmine mumble something.

“...It’s weird. When I talk to you, it doesn’t feel like I’m talking to a child.”

I didn’t respond. Pretending to be asleep, I hoped she wouldn’t push further for a reply.

“Good morning.” Jasmine was up and cooking something over the fire by the time I had gotten up and out of my sleeping bag.

My stomach rumbled to remind me that I hadn’t eaten since yesterday afternoon as I looked hungrily at the skewered fishes being grilled on the fire.

“Good morning! You should’ve woken me up, Jasmine. There’s no need for you to do all of the chores on your own.”

“...I tried waking you up... You wouldn’t budge.” Her half-closed eyes that give off an apathetic stare regarded me with concern. “If I didn’t hear you breathing, I would’ve mistaken you for a corpse.”

“Haha...” I let out an awkward chuckle. “I’m sorry, I really need to fix that.”

After devouring the grilled fish for breakfast, we put out the fire. Using the nearby stream to wash myself and my clothes, I put on my mask and swords, assuming we’d go hunting for some mana beasts around the area, when Jasmine stopped me.

“Your opponent for these few days will be me.”

“Huh?” I couldn’t help but be surprised at the turn of events. We came all the way here to spar?

“This area is close to the dungeon we will be exploring, but for these days, I want you to focus on fighting me. I noticed that your fighting style seems... awkward at times. Like, you know it in your head, but your body doesn’t listen to you... or something like that.”

Unsheathing her two daggers, she pointed one at me, continuing, "We won't use any kind of mana for these next few days while sparring."

I hadn't expected Jasmine to catch on to what I had been worried about, but it was a good opportunity.

"Good idea," I replied, unsheathing my shortsword.

"Use your other sword..." Jasmine's eyes flickered toward Dawn's Ballad.

"How did you know this was a sword?" I wasn't planning on hiding my weapon from her but I was still caught off guard.

"Knowing you, that black stick should be something more than just a cane or a practice stick," she shrugged, walking a few steps closer to me.

Giving her a confirming nod, I tossed the shortsword near the campfire.

As the sword soundlessly glided out from its scabbard, the translucent blade glowed a light teal as it reflected the sun's strong rays.

Holding it out in front me, I positioned myself. "Ready when you are."

"Y-Yeah," Jasmine stuttered as her eyes remained glued to Dawn's Ballad.

We dulled the edges of our weapons using mana before beginning. Without mana strengthening my body, I realized just how much I had been neglecting myself. After a few swings, my arms felt heavy and my legs trembled as they pushed feebly off the ground.

This was my mistake. I knew of the limits that my juvenile body had, but instead of trying to fix my shortcomings, I chose only to mask it using mana.

While magic in this world was capable of many things, it should be only used as a supplement to your abilities, not a replacement to cover them.

I lunged out with a sharp thrust aimed at Jasmine's sternum. Even though our swords were coated to prevent fatal injuries, it would still leave bruises and even broken bones if taken lightly; this made the sparring experience much more intense and real.

Jasmine swung her two daggers down in an outward arc, parrying my lunge and knocking the blade of my sword into the ground.

I brought my rear foot forward to maintain balance as my teal blade sunk into the ground below her. However, by that time, Jasmine had already brought her daggers back into position to follow up with a quick, downward slash.

Prying out my sword, I immediately pivoted my body to the side to avoid the overhead slash. As her daggers grazed harmlessly past my loose shirt, I kicked her arm away and stepped away into a more comfortable distance.

My arms were burning from the quick, consecutive movements as I positioned my sword in a defensive stance.

"It's my win," Jasmine said, sheathing her two daggers deftly into their scabbards attached to her thighs.

"You're right," I laughed as I dropped Dawn's Ballad on the ground. We had sparred for a little less than five minutes but my arms and legs screamed in protest from overuse. Massaging my forearms, I picked my blade back up and slid it back into its black sheath.

The duel had ended with me with the upper hand, but I didn't have the strength to proceed. It was my loss.

"Hey Jasmine, I think I'm going to need more than a couple of days to work this out," I confessed with a chuckle.

Her lips curled up slightly as she nodded in agreement.

I had three years before I'd attend Xyrus Academy. During my time at school, I would have plenty of chances to focus on studying mana.

I knew what my priorities were at this time.

Making a rough calculation in my head, I held up two fingers. "Two years, Jasmine. I'll dedicate two years to getting my body truly adjusted to sword-fighting without relying on mana."

"That's it?" she said, surprised.

"Just watch," I smirked.