

After The End 31

The Beginning After The End – Chapter 31: Last Leg

****Dragonspine Inn****

INSIGNIFICANT ADVENTURER'S POV:

“Hey hey, did you hear about the rumor going on?” I asked as I put down my mug of beer.

A burly man sitting at the same table finished off his glass before slamming it on the table. “If you’re talking about that famous masked swordsman, I say bullshit!”

From his flushed cheeks to his glazed eyes, it didn’t take a genius to tell he was drunk.

“No, apparently it’s true! An acquaintance of mine supposedly once teamed with him. He’s traveling with Jasmine Flamesworth, so it’s hard to miss him.” A skinny lad with his hair tied in a bun came over to our table to join in on the gossip.

“So? What did your so called ‘acquaintance’ say about him?” The drunkard exclaimed, getting impatient.

“Well, they went together to explore a minor dungeon that had been cleared before. Apparently, he’s pretty short! I think the rumors are true in that he’s not a mage.” The thin lad just shook his head in wonder.

“Bah! I call bullshit! It’s either that masked swordsman is an augments, or the rumors are just exaggerated! Did you hear some of the stories going around about him? There was even one rumor that he solo-cleared a dungeon by himself! Is that even possible? B-class augments can’t do that, even if it’s a low-level dungeon, and you expect me to believe an ordinary swordsman can?” The drunkard waved his empty mug for a refill on his beer.

“Yeah man, I would take some of those rumors with a pinch of salt. That solo-clear rumor... didn’t the guy also say that Jasmine Flamesworth went in with him? She probably helped him inside, right?” I took another sip, feeling a little lightheaded.

“Right, right? I’m telling you dunderheads, that swordsman is probably not even that strong! Half those rumors are probably rumors of Jasmine Flamesworth! That half-wit warrior dares to call himself a swordsman? Bring him here! I’ll take him on any day!”

Things were getting loud as the burly drunk was getting more and more intoxicated. The hottest topic these days amongst adventurers were about the masked swordsman. Some stories had said that he was Jasmine Flamesworth’s apprentice, but that was a little far-fetched. It was made known that he took a rank exam to place into B rank, which was already rare enough. More shocking than that, though, was he was now at A class! Moving a full rank up in two years’ time?

I just shook my head as I pitied myself. Here I was, a borderline C-class adventurer. I had failed the exam to move up a class three times these past three years. Once you gathered enough merit points from going into dungeons and completing missions and quests, adventurers were allowed the chance to move up a class upon passing an exam.

The exam differed for each class, but supposedly, to go into the A rank, which was the first class considered 'elite.' the examinee had to fight two-on-one with two A-rank adventurers and last for ten minutes.

The weird thing was that when some of the rumors had reached the examinees that were there with the masked swordsman when he took his exam, they all said that he was an augmenter. The rumor got so big around him because everyone who had been on a dungeon exploration with him had said that he never used mana but was still a monster.

The burly man was sobering up a little now, and was just annoyed by the fact that a midget swordsman was supposedly better than him. He was a Veteran B-class augmenter after all; I could imagine that was a pretty big source of pride for him.

The squeaky door to the pub opened and I dropped the fork that was in my hand as I saw a figure entering.

"Well speak of the devil! The little midget swordsman everyone's hyped up about is here! Where's your little guardian?" The burly man got up from his seat with a snide grin on his face, cheeks still red.

The very same masked swordsman, the one responsible for all of the crazy rumors...he was here in the flesh!

I saw his blue eyes underneath the mask look up at the burly man with an unknown expression. He was wearing a simple black coat that came down to his mid-thigh, the hood on the coat covering up what the mask couldn't. If I were just passing by, even with a mask and two swords, I probably wouldn't have noticed anything particular about him, but when you looked carefully, he was an odd sight. The masked figure stood at about 1.6m, which wasn't that tall. He had a very slim figure underneath his coat, which either suggested he was a normal person, or a conjurer. Strapped behind him was a normal short sword on top and a sleek black stick on the bottom. I couldn't help wondering if he was actually a conjurer, and that was his staff.

After casting a glance at the drunkard that was calling him out, the masked man simply walked past him, uninterested, as if he wasn't worth the time.

"Hey b*****d! Are you ignoring me? Just because you're a little famous for your bullshit rumors, you think you're better than me?" The drunkard hit his last straw as he unsheathed the giantsword from his back and held it above his head to swing down.

"C-Calm down! You know you're not allowed to kill someone in here!" I tried to quell the man, holding my arms up to stop his sword from swinging, but the masked man didn't even turn back and just kept walking towards the front counter.

This pissed off the drunk even more as he augmented his body and sword, which both emitted a silvery glow, pushed me aside, and swung down at the masked swordsman.

A thundering explosion resounded, and I stared in horror, imagining the b*****y corpse that was probably cleaved in two from the force of that blow. However, contrary to what I expected, the sword had created a small crater next to the masked man, missing him by just a hair's breadth.

Whew... At least the drunk had enough sense to not kill the man; he probably just wanted to scare him.

I stood back up about to calm the burly man down from swinging again, but when I turned to him, I saw that his face was twisted into a shocked, seething expression.

“GRAAH!” He swung his sword again, lifting it out of the small depression he had made on the ground. The customers that were seated in the dining room of the inn were all staring now, some even cheering for gore.

With mana reinforcing the burly man’s body and his greatsword, no matter how drunk he was; his power and speed were no joke. He attacked with a flurry of swings that obliterated the wooden seats and tables in the way but no matter how much he had attacked, his sword always missed. The man’s sword was met with empty air as the masked swordsman dipped and swayed to avoid everything. The crazy part though was that he didn’t take a single step from his position.

After about a minute-long barrage of attacks by the burly man and his greatsword, he was sweating profusely as his face wrinkled his frustration, but he was more cautious now as he took a step back.

“Is dodging the only thing you can do? I guess your guardian did all of the hard work for you while all you did was run away!” The man gave him a menacing smile, still confident that he could win against the masked man. He put both hands on the grip of his sword and swung again, this time, much faster than his previous attacks.

With a sharp clang, the burly drunk’s greatsword that probably weighed more than the masked man himself was sent flying but I didn’t know how. The sound made it seem like the sword had been met with metal from another sword but I couldn’t see it. I didn’t even see the masked swordsman pull out his weapon.

“Are you done?” the masked man asked.

“A-Aah...” was the only sound I heard from the drunk before we all dropped to the ground.

Suddenly, I felt like I was deep underwater. I couldn’t breathe and the surrounding air seemed to want to crush me.

“...”

What was this?

I-I’m scared...

I’d heard that some elite fighters were able to produce a killing intent that could scare mana beasts away, but what the hell was this? Was there such a thing as a killing intent that could actually kill people?

Slowly turning my head to face the masked man who was obviously the source of this bloodthirst, I felt the blood drain from my face as I stared at him.

I couldn’t tell what sort of expression he had under his mask but I didn’t need to. There seemed to be this dark, baleful aura bursting out of him. I could’ve sworn it felt like that dark aura around him was alive and raging. The killing intent wasn’t even focused on me but I had to will myself to keep from wetting my pants.

I witnessed, then, the sorry state that the drunk was in. His eyes were wide and his body stiff, as if he was petrified. He was muttering something and I could see tears streaming down his cheeks while the crotch area from his pants were a darker shade.

Suddenly, he retracted his bloodthirst and I could breathe again. I desperately took in deep gulps of air and ended up coughing. I could see the other adventurers and the workers of the inn doing the same, some in a worse state than I was.

The masked man turned back to the counter and faced the trembling waitress at the front desk as her face was a full three shades lighter than it was before.

"I believe there's a sack of rations under the name 'Note' that a friend of mine ordered not too long ago," the masked man spoke, his baritone voice clear and precise.

"Y-Yes! I'll get that for you right away!"

He gave a slight nod to the waitress as she handed him a sack of food, and he left as the whole inn just watched him go off, not daring to make a sound.

ARTHUR LEYWIN'S POV:

"What took so long?" Jasmine divided the food and put it into each of the pouches attached to the saddle of our horses.

"Ah, I had a little quarrel with one of the adventurers at the inn! Haha." I scratched my head as I hopped on my brown mount.

I could feel Jasmine staring at me suspiciously, her half-closed eyes imagining what sort of mischief I had created.

"Don't mind, don't mind! I didn't make a big deal out of it! I didn't even hurt the guy!" I just waved my hand, trying to persuade Jasmine from going back to Dragonspine Inn.

Jasmine just shook her head and mounted her horse as well, snapping at the reigns to go.

"Haap!" I did the same as we headed towards our destination.

As we traveled, I thought back to the last two years. Jasmine wanted me to get to A class as soon as possible to explore the dungeon we were heading towards today. Along the journey to raise my class, she'd ranked up as well, becoming an AA-class Adventurer. There was still quite a bit of a level difference between her and Kaspian but she did improve a lot during these two years. When we weren't on missions or exploring low-class dungeons, we were sparring. At night, I made sure to meditate for at least a few hours before I went to sleep. During these past two years, I broke through into the light orange stage, which I counted as a success considering how much time I had spent meditating.

No. The biggest improvement throughout this period was definitely my body. Not using mana made me take a step back and remember how to use my body and sword efficiently so I could be that much better when I augmented myself. I couldn't say I was at 100% in terms of strength, since the physical reach of my limbs and my muscles are not as developed as they had been when I was an adult, but I no longer felt awkward or restrained when I fought now. I fine-tuned some of my sword techniques to better fit my current body, which I'd need to improve along the way.

It was far from an easy ride, and I had scars on my body to prove it, but I knew it was worth it. Coupled with my dragon will-assimilated body and the use of mana rotation, I could finally be at ease in knowing that I was on the right track for the future.

Jasmine had gotten stronger than ever before, too. While journeying with her, I had noticed that her biggest flaw was in her swordsmanship. Growing up, only learning fire attribute skills for a little while until she was deemed unfit, she had been on her own in learning how to best control her swords to fit her wind attribute skills.

I wasn't the best at wind but that didn't mean I couldn't teach her a few tricks. She passed the AA class examination by utilizing the new skills I had taught her, along with her double-blade techniques that she had developed on her own. I wanted to take the AA class exam as well, but the merit point requirements made it so I would need to complete a lot more missions and clear many more dungeons before being eligible.

I sent out a mental transmission to Sylvie. She'd been acting strange ever since we had come to the Beast Glades. We would normally always keep in touch, but for some reason, she didn't want to come meet me yet, even when I had gone back to Xyrus to visit my family. Every time I told her to come back, she responded by saying there was something she needed to finish before coming back. Despite all of that, however, I could definitely tell how much she'd matured over the course of the years. We were now able to hold conversations and her emotions had developed to become much complex than before, sometimes to a fault.

While I went home a few times during the first year, since last year, it'd taken too long to make the trip back to Xyrus and come back to the dungeons. Instead, we stuck to letters and meeting my parents every so often at Guild Hall, where the transportation gates were. My mother had been pretty dissatisfied by this fact but she understood to a certain extent. I could tell my father had been keeping up with his training because he had broken through into the solid orange stage now, which was impressive for someone his age. I could still recall the goofy grin he had plastered on his face as he made sure to point out who I had gotten my impressive talent in mana from.

They'd also told me a lot about what was happening at the Helstea House. My sister was still quite a bit away from forming her mana core, but I was surprised when I had learned that Lilia awakened a couple of weeks ago. Her awakening caused her bed to implode, which was about average for a mage. Her parents were ecstatic by this to say the least, and didn't wait to enroll her into Xyrus Academy. After being tested, while her mana core had been measured to be about average, it turned out the efficiency of her mana veins were excellent. She had a high capacity to absorb mana from her surroundings, which was essential for all conjurers. The fact that Lilia would be my senior at school when I started going next year was amusing.

"We're here," Jasmine announced, snapping me out of my thoughts. At her signal, the two of us brought our horses to a slow trot into a small clearing in the woods.

The clearing that was surrounded by tall trees, and where the dungeon entrance was located, was littered with a group of adventurers clearing their camp, some checking their weapons as they got ready to go in.

“I guess we’re stuck with more augmenters,” an all-too-familiar voice rang as he clicked his tongue. Getting off of my mount, I made my way towards the group of adventurers when the blond fire conjurer from the examination site shot me a distasteful look. Jasmine followed behind me as an armored augmenter stepped forth and held out his hand in front of him, gesturing for a shake.

“Please don’t mind Lucas and let me introduce you to the party. My name is Reginald Brooks, and I’m an A-class augmenter. I am an earth attribute yellow stage core that specializes in using a hammer.” He pointed at the giant warhammer lying on the ground where the group stood.

Studying Reginald, the man had short, messy brown hair that matched his eyes. His square jaw that was covered in a thick beard, coupled with his near-two-meter height and broad shoulders made for a very intimidating man.

The augmenters in the group, excluding Jasmine and me, consisted of Reginald, Kriol, and Brald. Kriol was a very defensive, water attribute augmenter that only wielded a gigantic shield as his weapon. He was a head shorter than Reginald with a large belly that indicated the man loved his beer by the barrel. I could tell he was strong, though, by how firm his body was overall, despite his belly that squeezed out of his armor.

Brald was a very noble-looking man that stood just a bit shorter than Reginald. He wore a white, metal armor that covered his shoulders and chest only, with a luxurious mantle flowing behind him. With trimmed blond hair and sharp, hazel eyes, he seemed like a real lady-killer. To my surprise, he was a real gentleman and offered us handshakes and a rather innocent smile.

“I go by Brald and just became an AA-class, light yellow stage augmenter. I am a fire attribute augmenter that specializes in the broadsword and shield. I’ll be the one to lead us today.” He beamed, shying away after meeting eyes with Jasmine.

After the augmenters introduced themselves, the conjurers stepped up. Including Lucas, there were four other conjurers. One of them was a lanky man and the other, a girl, while the last one was the serious-looking, bespectacled black-haired boy that I had seen at the examination site.

What was his name again...?

“My name is Elijah Knight. A-class, dark orange stage conjurer... single specialization in Earth,” he said tersely.

I couldn’t help but eye him carefully. There had to be more than that. He wouldn’t be able to get by with skipping the exam and being placed into B rank by just being an earth conjurer, no matter how young he was.

The beady-eyed lanky man that looked well into his thirties came forth next. He had a smug look on his face despite his less than attractive appearance, with his crooked nose and greasy brown hair parted down the middle. “Ahem! I go by Oliver and I am an A-class, dark yellow stage conjurer. I am an emitter deviant, specializing in healing.” He stuck his jaw out smugly as he crossed his arms in content.

Despite his attitude, it was reassuring to have a healer in the party.

“Hi! My name is Samantha but you guys can just call me Sammy! Dark yellow stage, A-class conjurer with a single specialization in water at your service!” She threw in a wink in my direction. Samantha

looked to be around her mid-twenties and was an attractive woman but by her attitude, I'm sure she was aware. She had wavy blond hair that flowed down her shoulders and light blue eyes that looked almost grey. Her eyes were big and round; making her look deceptively innocent, and her petite height complimented that fact well. The girl constantly swayed her hips as she switched the leg she was putting her weight on, attracting sideway glances from the men nearby; Oliver was especially engrossed.

"Jasmine, light-yellow stage, AA-class augmenter. Wind attribute with dual swords," my partner said without batting an eye.

"Note, light orange stage, A-class augmenter. Fire attribute with specialization in sword," I added impatiently.

Brald smiled at us, "Welcome, you two! I'm certainly glad to have another AA class in the group!" The other two augmenters nodded in agreement while Oliver and Lucas's apathetic faces showed they didn't care. When asked for an introduction by Brald, Lucas practically spat out that he was a fire-specialized conjurer who was at dark yellow stage. Through all of this, Elijah kept his stone face while I was already beginning to grow annoyed by the constant glances Samantha shot at me, trying to look through the mask somehow.

"I can't help but ask. Mr. Note, there have been various rumors about you saying that you are not an augmenter, yet you clearly just announced that you are," Reginald queried, picking up his giant hammer and holding it up on his shoulder.

"I haven't been using my magic for a while due to personal reasons. That must've been the reason why those rumors came up." I just shrugged without breaking stride.

Noticing that I didn't want to indulge their curiosity, he coughed uncomfortably and set up the formation for the party.

It would basically be Brald in the front, since his shield and sword style was the best fit for the front line. Beside him were Reginald and I, who both specialized in offense. Guarding the rear was Kriol with his gigantic shield to prevent us from getting flanked and Jasmine beside him, ready to kill anything that may get past him. We were all in charge of protecting the four conjurers with Oliver in the dead center, the most protected, since he was our healer.

"We should head out immediately," Brald declared. He assumed the position as the leader since he was the front line and the only other AA class besides the quiet Jasmine.

This dungeon was deemed AA class, meaning parties with only A class and above were allowed to enter. Brald recently found out that there was a hidden tunnel that led to an unexplored portion of the dungeon, which we would be going into today; this meant that most of our dungeon-exploring would be through uncharted areas. Everyone unsheathed their weapons while even the conjurers wiped their smug expressions as we stepped into the dungeon named by the first explorers: "The Dire Tombs."

The Beginning After The End – Chapter 32: Dire Tombs

Stepping into the dungeon, I felt the temperature suddenly drop as we descended down a gradual slope. I stood adjacent to Brald, who had his shield up and his sword drawn.

Jasmine and I did some research on the Dire Tombs dungeon we were in now. It was a unique place, even amongst the mysterious dungeons. The beasts that made their homes here had been described in the records as “undead.” I’d never heard of mana beasts that could come back to life. Because of this, one of the hardest aspects of clearing this dungeon seemed to be the endless amount of undead mana beasts.

Digging deeper, some adventurers and mage guilds even speculated that inside the bottom of this dungeon might be a special artifact that was able to reanimate dead mana beasts, but no one had been able to prove it.

Clearing the dungeon meant that the area had to be explored. It was different from conquering the dungeon, where the mana beasts inside had been defeated and the treasures looted.

This dungeon had been cleared—or at least it was, until Brald had discovered the hidden passage—but never defeated.

“We’re approaching the first level of the dungeon, stay on guard. The mana beasts here aren’t strong, but there’ll be a lot of them. Don’t waste your time trying to collect the mana cores from the beasts...they don’t have one,” Brald declared, lowering his stance.

I heard a faint muttering from Oliver, our healer, who was already beginning to complain about the lack of rewards from this dungeon.

While the goal of defeating a dungeon was usually to loot the accumulated treasures high-level mana beasts had amassed through their lives, most of the profit usually came from collecting the beast cores on the way down. In most cases, even if parties couldn’t defeat or even clear a dungeon, they were still able to come out with a hefty sum from just the beast cores, which could be sold for a high price depending on their level.

One of the reasons this dungeon had been unpopular, and why our party was the only one inside the dungeon was because the mana beasts here had no cores. This meant a big chunk of revenue from trying to clear the dungeon would be gone.

Suddenly, a steady growl filled the dungeon hall.

Narrowing my eyes, I focused on the source of the sound. We had just reached the end of the descending passage and into an underground cave no larger than fifty meters in diameter. Looking around, the whole cave was glowing in a dim, blue color. Above us, the cave was covered in stalactites, threatening us with their sharp, gleaming tips.

Out from the spaces between the stalactites fell two dozen mana beasts that looked like large bats, except with four limbs replacing what normally would’ve been wings. The hollow body of the bat-like mana beasts had their ribs fully visible and inside it, where the beast core should’ve been, was a cracked rock.

I guess it was true.

“Batrunners! They’re not strong but they attack in groups. Minimizing the use of our mana is going to be the key inside this dungeon! Get ready!” Brald roared over the growling of the batrunners, all of whom were positioned to pounce, their patches of fur standing on end and their teeth bared.

“Form and torment the foes around! Fire Cyclone!” I heard a yell from behind me and I realized it was Lucas who had casted the spell.

Suddenly, four twisters of fire swirled to life around us, filling the cavern with a wave of heat.

As the fiery cyclones spread out, sharp yelps and pained whimpers echoed from the mana beasts.

Many of the batrunners had been engulfed by the fire tornadoes and were charred to ashes. The ones that were fortunate enough to escape the tornadoes had fled, trying to circle around and attack us.

I could hear Brald click his tongue, dissatisfied that Lucas had just ignored his orders and casted a spell that wasn't necessary.

The fire cyclones had killed most of the batrunners and the ones left had been badly burned, making it easy to defeat the rest.

“Next time, follow orders and don't waste mana like that. Your spell was overkill,” Brald growled over his shoulder before marching ahead.

Lucas just rolled his eyes, “I don't see the problem. We killed them fast enough so that everyone else could save their mana.”

Shaking his head, Brald ushered us forward to the other end of the cave. As we continued forward to the location of the next room, the rather sickening sound of bones crunching and flesh gurgling made us all turn our heads back.

To my surprise and disgust, the batrunners that had just been killed began to reanimate, their bodies snapping into place as the ones that had been burned just seemed to rise up again from their ashes.

Dire Tombs...What an unfortunately fitting name for this dungeon.

We chose to ignore them and advanced into the next room while Elijah quietly casted an earthen wall over the entrance so that the batrunners couldn't follow us.

The opening on the other side of the cave led us through another dark corridor just wide enough for four people to go through at once.

I could tell everyone was a bit more relaxed upon leaving the first cave but I couldn't shake an uneasy feeling.

As if to answer me, a barely-discernable click and faint whistle caught my attention.

I immediately drew my sword and sidestepped in front of Samantha.

My shortsword blurred as I instinctively parried the projectiles aimed towards Samantha, the sharp ring of metal on metal echoing through the dim corridor.

“Th-Thank you...” Samantha muttered mindlessly. Even under the dim blue lighting, I could tell that her face had paled as the metal spikes that almost killed her landed on the ground, harmlessly, beside her feet.

“Something’s wrong...there were no traps last time.” Brald picked up one of the pointed spikes to study it but was baffled.

“I don’t think they were traps but strategically placed mana beasts, which doesn’t make the situation better,” I said, noticing the faint scuttle of the small beasts on the walls.

“Stay alert, everyone,” Brald said, kicking the spikes to the side. Jasmine already had her twin daggers guarding her vitals before Reginald and Kriol readied their weapons. Samantha inched a bit closer to me, her hand pinching my sleeve as her free hand gripped tightly at her wand.

Fortunately, we reached the end of the hall with no other traps deterring us. The next cave was similar to the previous cave, but twice the size and littered with suspicious holes all over the ground.

“Don’t get near the holes. They’re geysers that shoot extremely hot streams of gas up. It should be fine as long as you’re not in direct proximity of the blast,” Brald announced as we all looked for any signs of mana beasts.

As if on cue, the cave trembled, shaking the sharp stalactites overhead to a nerve-wracking degree. Forcing my attention from the wobbling spikes, a large figure erupting from the ground.

“Was that here last time, Brald?” the pot-bellied Kriol asked in a worrying tone as we all peered up at the mana beast.

The creature resembled a worm, except it was thick enough to easily swallow any one of us here, whole. With a glowing red hide and countless rows of teeth encircling the hole that I assumed was the mouth, it was impossible to guess how long this creature was since its body was still mostly underground.

“N-No, it wasn’t—I don’t get what’s happening. It doesn’t make sense for new mana beast species to enter a dungeon like this.” Our handsome leader had a wavering look, his mask of confidence all but gone.

“Cheh. It’s not a big deal. It’s just an oversized insect,” Lucas quipped from behind.

We braced ourselves for its strike, but to our surprise, the gigantic red worm didn’t attack us. Instead, the beast burrowed back underground, leaving in its path another gaping hole.

“It doesn’t seem to be after us,” muttered Elijah while his sharp, bespectacled eyes studied the hole the giant worm had left.

The red worm-beast was now burrowing itself into the walls of the cave, creating more holes from all different angles, but it never confronted us.

“Are we just going to stand around watching the worm dig or are we going to go?” Oliver, our lanky emitter, shoved Brald out of the way, fearlessly taking the lead as he strode towards the other end of the cave.

It was obvious not just to me, but to everyone else that Oliver’s brazen attitude was to show off in front of a certain party member.

“Get back here! We need to assess what’s happening before we go across!” Brald barked, his face furrowed in agitation at the arrogance displayed by the conjurers. As our leader stepped forward to go after him, a thundering rumble shook as the entire cavern fizzed with the sound of a boiling kettle.

“Lucas! Heatwave Barrier, now!” I roared at the confused, blonde noble.

Just as I yelled out the command, fumes began filling the cavern.

The holes. The holes that were here since the beginning and the holes littered across the ground, roof, and walls made by the giant worm all trembled before released a fiery torrent of deadly gas.

“D**n it,” I cursed. The giant worm was making the holes in order to kill us, and we just let it happen.

I managed to pull Brald, who was just at arm’s length of me, back in before he had the chance to run after Oliver.

Just as the barrier was erected, a blast of a mustard-yellow gas bombarded us. Lucas’s barrier trembled against the pressure but Samantha managed to gather her wits in time to help him out with a water barrier of her own just beneath Lucas’s.

The two barriers of opposing elements sizzled, making the area inside the spell a makeshift sauna. Despite the crude teamwork, however, the barrier held, leaving us sweating but intact, until the blast of gas began to subside.

However, due to the strength of the gaseous blasts that filled the cavern, I lost sight of our idiot healer.

As both Lucas and Samantha released their barriers with stifled breaths, the horrid scene came into view.

The only thing left of Oliver was bones, as blood and pieces of flesh still stuck to parts of his charred skeleton. All of his possessions had been completely destroyed by the acidic gas except for the bright-emerald gem that was once embedded at the tip of his staff.

“S**t!” Brald cursed, gnashing his teeth as Samantha stumbled backward from the ghastly sight.

Oliver didn’t mean much to us as a person but he was our healer. That idiot ran off, not even casting a protection spell on himself.

“Let’s move out!” I ordered as everyone remained silent. I went ahead and picked up the gem, studying it before comparing it to the gem that Lucas and Samantha had on their weapons.

The gem embedded on Lucas’s staff was of much higher quality than the gem Oliver had. However, there were apparent flaws on the sapphire gem fashioned to the tip of Samantha’s wand, so I tossed the emerald stone to her, telling her to replace it with his gem.

“Note is right, we need to move before another eruption occurs. That giant worm beast is making more holes. I don’t think our barriers will hold for another wave,” our leader stated as he stepped in charge once more.

I glanced back at Jasmine who just solemnly nodded at me. Even if her face remained expressionless, her knuckles were white from clutching too tightly to her daggers; it wasn't just me that was frustrated by the turn of events.

We were halfway through the cave when Elijah, who was behind me, asked, "How did you know that the cave was going to explode with steam like that?" Everyone's eyes shifted toward me, waiting for my answer.

"I didn't," I replied without turning back. "I knew that something was about to happen, but even I didn't know exactly what."

The giant worm that had been constantly burrowing in and out of the cave, creating more holes, suddenly stopped in front of us, blocking the exit. Without warning, it whipped its head forward and smashed at the ground we were standing on.

Kriol, who was positioned at the back, lunged forward and, with surprising harmony with Samantha, created a water barrier that cushioned the blow before they were sent tumbling back. However, this gave enough time for Elijah to e***t a large ring of rock to erupt, cuffing the worm to the ground.

"Impact Blast!" Reginald bellowed as his giant hammer glowed a bright yellow. Jumping up, he spun his body, creating momentum before smashing his hammer directly at the worm's head.

With a deafening explosion, the worm's whole body shook as Reginald's mana-infused attack sent a shockwave to the beast's body, creating ripples on its red hide.

However, the attack did little but destroy the earthen binding that Elijah had conjured, freeing the giant worm. The giant mana beast flailed its body, knocking away Reginald and Brald, who was also nearby.

I managed to pull Elijah out of harm's way before charging at the beast myself. The giant worm shivered, then unleashed a shower of acid spittle at me.

I drowned out the panicked yells of my comrades, telling me to run away, as I advanced toward the worm. I dipped and weaved my body, sidestepping the deadly globs of yellow saliva that landed inches away from my body.

Once I was close enough, I drew my shortsword, willing flames to surround the blade as I activated mana rotation.

"Sear," I muttered under my breath.

The flames that surrounded my blade wisped away, leaving the metal glowing a fiery-red.

I swung my red blade at an incoming blob, scattering it away with the flat of my blade. The beast's acid spit scattered, some of it burning through my clothes but leaving me otherwise unharmed.

Making one last lunge, I tore through the underside of the worm, welding the wound as my blade burned through the flesh.

The worm let out a shrill screech as it began flailing wildly. Jasmine followed up and jumped over me as she stabbed her two daggers into the smoldering gash that I had just created.

With another shriek, the giant worm escaped back into the hole it had emerged from.

“The oversized worm wasn’t even strong.” Lucas just shook his head, disappointed, when all of a sudden, we heard another rumble.

I was afraid of this; the worm wasn’t trying to kill us—it was trying to delay us in time for another eruption from the holes.

The familiar howl of a boiling kettle once again reverberated throughout the cavern.

I whipped my head to Lucas but just from a single glance, I knew he couldn’t e***t his barrier in time as he stared blankly at the walls.

Muttering the incantation, I leaped toward the blonde brat.

[Phoenix’s Cape]

A surge of a dark-red fire surrounded my body, protecting me and Lucas against the deadly gas. I looked back in relief to see that Jasmine had erected a swirling aura of wind around her that dissipated the torrent of acid steam.

As the howl of gas quieted and the room cleared, my team started coming back into view, one by one.

Kriold came into view first; he had managed to protect Elijah under his gigantic shield augmented with water. Both of them had red sores on their bodies and some on their faces but they were relatively uninjured.

Brald appeared on the ground, his right arm clutching his other arm that I couldn’t quite see. Upon closer look, I couldn’t help but curse aloud. It seemed like Brald only augmented his shield in flames instead of his whole body to protect Samantha because his sword arm was obliterated from the elbow down. Reginald looked a bit worse than Kriold and Elijah, but Brald was by far in the worst shape.

Our leader’s sword was on the ground as his stump of an arm had been burned black at the end.

“Let’s go!” Brald yelled through gritted teeth. He slung the shield on his back and picked up the sword with his remaining hand.

We immediately made a break for the exit to arrive in another dim hallway, much wider than the last one.

Everyone remained silent as we tried to gather our breaths. Samantha had ripped out a part of her robe and was fashioning a bandage for what was left of Brald’s right arm. Kriol slumped against his shield as Reginald and Jasmine sat upright against the rock walls.

Looking around, everyone’s faces had sunken. We weren’t even halfway through the dungeon but had already incurred such damages, with our healer dead and our leader critically injured.

“This is why I said to stay alert, Lucas! If you had stayed focused and reacted in time to set up a barrier, we wouldn’t be in this state—I wouldn’t be in this state!” Brald lashed out venomously but with good reason. His career as an adventurer was probably gone after this. He’d most likely be demoted from his class once the guild found out about his crippling injury.

“Don’t blame me! It was your fault you couldn’t protect yourself in time!” he spat back, standing up.

“Are you f*****g kidding me? Note had to save your a*s! You didn’t do s**t and you’re saying it’s my fault?” Brald snarled, picking up his sword.

“Enough!” I roared, instilling mana into my voice. The large corridor echoed with my voice, as both Brald and Lucas immediately snapped their mouths shut in surprise.

“There are a couple of choices we need to make. Reginald’s body is a bit burnt. I don’t think it’s that bad but Brald, you need to make the choice of whether you want to continue or not. We’re only a bit more than an hour from the surface so you can probably make it back up by yourself,” I stated, staring at our leader through the slits of my mask.

“I’ll keep going. This will probably be my last dungeon raid so I might as well make it last,” he grumbled, cradling his right stump.

I turned my gaze to the noble boy who had his chin held high and proud as if he’d done nothing wrong. “Lucas, get your act together. It doesn’t matter whether you’re a dark-yellow core or God himself. Right now, the only thing you are is a liability. If you’re going to continue acting out on your own, you might as well just go on by yourself.”

He glared back at me with a baleful look but kept to himself, whipping his head away from the group.

“Samantha and Elijah. We need you guys to stay focused and alert to set up a barrier at a moment’s notice,” I continued, getting a nod of affirmation from the two of them.

“Let’s get a couple hours of rest before we continue on.” I sat down next to Jasmine, taking out a sack of water from my bag.

The group remained silent as my gaze kept turning to Brald. Through the hours that some of us had used to sleep, our leader had been reduced to a state of dread and angst.

Suddenly, Brald got up from where he was seated and walked over to me. “I think you should take charge of the group.”

Looking up at him for a moment, I studied the lifeless eyes of our leader. “Okay.”

After a few hours, we got up with our mana somewhat replenished and continued marching down. This hall wasn’t as long as the previous ones but at the end of the hall was a large, double door with unfamiliar runes etched all over it.

“I-I don’t get it. Even this part is different. There was never a door here,” Brald groaned, shaking his head.

“The only thing that was the same was the first cave, where the batrunners had been,” he continued, analyzing the runes. He tried to touch it but with his dominant hand gone, he just swung his stub hollowly at the air. After he realized what he was doing, he cursed aloud and walked to the back.

“Well, no use complaining about it now,” Reginald shrugged, lifting up his hammer. “I don’t know what those runes or symbols are but there are cracks all over them. I doubt they’ll do much now,” he said as he swung his hammer.

The impact his silver hammer made against the old, metal doors created a shower of sparks as a deep thud boomed.

Reginald was visibly shocked by the sturdiness of the door as it lay intact.

“Impact Blast!” The door shuddered this time, but stayed firm.

“Impact Blast!” The blow this time was harder and the door clicked before opening just a little. Stepping forward, Reginald gripped at the slight opening and pried the doors open.

I couldn’t see what was on the other side, but the burly augmenter took a step back as he muttered, “What in the...”

The Beginning After The End – Chapter 33: Dire Tombs II

On the other side of the large doors was a beautiful meadow that stretched out far beyond my view. As we all peered agape at the brightly lit field of grass that glittered like polished emeralds, for a moment, the fact that we were underground seemed like a dream.

“Let me guess, this field wasn’t here last time either,” Reginald muttered as his eyes stayed glued to the enrapturing scenery in front of him.

Brald let out a sharp breath as he continued to stare at the field. “N-No, nothing of the sort.”

After mumbling something indiscernible, Reginald let out a sigh of resignation and stepped through the door. The rest of us just exchanged hesitant glances before following after the hammer-wielding augmenter.

Stepping into the meadow, I studied the large area. I almost thought that we had stepped through some teleportation gate out of the Dire Tombs until I looked up to see the rows of stalactites high up on the ceiling. The deposits of calcium that littered the ceiling of this cave glowed brightly, to the point where I had to squint to make out any details.

What I found suspicious, though, was the very fact that a space like this could exist underground. There were no pillars visible and this area stretched for at least a few hundred meters in all directions. With such an extensive open field with no supports holding it up, I was surprised that this place hadn’t been buried in rocks.

“Wow! It’s so pretty!” Samantha gasped, her head constantly turning to take in the view.

Tall trees and bushels of shrubs dotted the field. Even I couldn’t help wanting to just lay down and relax here but ever since we walked through the door, the hairs on my body had been standing on end, as if my body wanted me to stay alert.

Everyone’s guards seemed to be down except for Jasmine and Elijah, whose eyes kept darting around as if searching for anything suspicious.

“Something’s off. Keep your guards up, everyone.” I remained vigilant with my shortsword out and my left hand on the grip of Dawn’s Ballad, which was still sheathed.

“Are you sure? I don’t even hear anything, let alone see much besides the grass and trees,” Kriol asked dubiously. I could tell he was a bit doubtful but he followed my advice and raised his shield.

I continued examining our surroundings to see what was making me feel so tense. The light that radiated from the stalactites glowed much brighter than the ones from the previous caves. There was also a thin veil of haze layered over the meadow but that was it. There was literally nothing else besides the plants and this mist.

What am I missing?

However, soon enough, the mist around us began to gradually grow more dense, eventually thick enough so that I could only make out the shapes of everyone around me.

Suddenly, a deep thud broke through the silence hovering around the mist.

“Clara? Is that you? H-How are you alive?”

I whipped my head to the direction of the voice in time to see that Kriol had dropped his gigantic shield and was holding his arms out, reaching desperately at something in the distance.

“I knew you couldn’t be dead, Clara! Stay there! I’m coming to get you!” Kriol bolted off, leaving his shield behind him.

“D**n it, Kriol! Stop, it’s dangerous!” I cursed, trying to warn him, but his figure faded out of sight within the ever-growing layer of fog.

All of a sudden, something grabbed ahold of my arm and jerked me.

“I think the mist is an illusion.” I heard Jasmine’s voice right next to me, but even with how close she was, it was becoming hard to make out details inside the haze.

“I thought so too.” I clicked my tongue in frustration. “Everyone! Stick together! This mist is playing tricks on your senses. Samantha, barrier!”

Eventually, they were able to gather, using the sound of my voice as their destination. Huddling together, we discussed our plans for clearing through this cavern inside a sphere of water.

“Who’s Clara?” Samantha asked, confusion evident on her face.

Reginald shook his head. “It...It’s Kriol’s fiancée. But it’s impossible for her to be alive. I saw her get killed in a dungeon with my own two eyes. We even cremated and buried her ashes together!”

It was obvious that Reginald and Brald were both shaken up. The three had partied before numerous times, so the name Clara wasn’t news to them, and hearing Kriol go after his dead fiancée wasn’t exactly the best of news either.

“What the hell is going on?” Lucas cursed under his breath. His knuckles were white from how hard he was gripping his staff, and it looked like he was doing all he could to keep his wits together.

“Jasmine. Do you have a spell that can create a wind strong enough to clear this mist around us?” I turned my head to my partner, hoping she could give me some good news. We didn’t have any wind attribute conjurers here besides her.

She answered, lowering her gaze. "Not strong enough to clear it all away, but I can make a path."

We gave her space inside the barrier of water as she began preparing her spell. Soft gusts that glowed a greenish hue began swirling around her, gathering around her hands. Her straight black hair lashed wildly around her as the swirls of wind circled her arms, growing larger.

While an augments's biggest disadvantage compared to their counterparts was the limited range of their spells, after a certain level, augments were able to store and exert enough mana to use ranged techniques. Of course, the power and efficiency at this stage would be vastly inferior to a conjurer of the same level, but even the fact that she had enough control over her mana to do this showed talent.

The mist around us grew thicker, limiting our field of vision to about a meter away from us. The once peaceful field of grass now emanated an ominous pressure, almost as if this mist wanted to swallow us alive.

"Clear my enemies from my path with an ever-raging howl," Jasmine chanted, struggling to keep the frenzied wind in tow.

[Storm's Gale]

The condensed whirlwinds swirling around Jasmine's arms collided as she clapped her hands together. The impact of the two tornadoes expanded and burst forward, shredding the mist into a clear path in front of us.

However, the once excited looks on everyone's faces turned pale at the sight before us. The tornado revealed a path, but also uncovered something else.

Tentacles of vines and branches were quickly making their way towards us.

"Enough of this!" Lucas pushed Jasmine aside and swung his tall staff at the wave of vines advancing towards us and muttered a spell.

"Crescent Ember!" he shouted, lashing his staff. The bright flame that glowed on the tip of the staff expanded, shooting a large blade of fire.

With a fiery explosion, the slithering vines and branches flinched back, but other than a scorched impression where the spell had hit, they were unaffected.

"S**t! What kind of trees aren't afraid of fire?" Brald hissed as he ignited his broadsword into a fiery tornado and charged into the wave of vines that were approaching rapidly.

"Samantha! Elijah! Lucas! Support us!" I barked, willing mana into my body and sword as well.

Jasmine rushed next to me, both daggers unsheathed and glowing brightly. The spell she had used to clear a path had drained a lot of her mana, but it didn't do much as the mist had already filled the path the tornado spell had created.

Reginald stayed behind to protect our Conjurers as they casted spells.

Brald let out an unintelligible battle roar as he continued mindlessly hacking away at the endless wave of vines that seemed to manifest out of nowhere.

The vines, however, were regenerating faster than Brald was cutting them as the one-armed adventurer was getting buried deeper and deeper inside the torrent of vines.

“Fool,” I cursed under my breath. Whether he had just gone reckless or he wanted to die here in battle, I couldn’t help but doubt that he was an AA class adventurer.

Augmenting my sword in fire as well, I made my way to our one-armed companion, hoping I would make it in time to support him before he got himself killed.

Concentrating on the fire dancing wildly around my sword, I condensed the augmentation so that just a thin layer of bright red enveloped my sword.

[Searing Edge]

Lashing my molten-hot weapon at the vines continuously shooting themselves at me, a pile of dismembered branches began forming around me.

I kept tabs on Jasmine to make sure she was okay but she seemed to be fine on her own, her body spinning furiously like a cyclone of blades, mincing any vines that came in her direction. Brald was having a harder time as more and more gashes began oozing fresh blood on his face and body.

“—spread and burn!”

[Liquid Blaze]

Lucas finished his spell first as he unleashed a spray of red liquid from his staff while Reginald continued blocking the incoming vines that targeted our conjurers.

The three of us jumped back to stay out of the way of the spell. I had to hand it to the noble brat for still thinking straight despite the situation. The spell, Liquid Fire, wasn’t as powerful as the actual fire spells but it spread quickly and, if not doused, would eventually envelop everything in its way.

The spell landed on the torrent of vines, but before the liquid fire was even able to spread, the mist around us gathered toward the spot where the spell hit the vine. With a loud hiss, the spell was doused by the moisture from the mist.

I could see Lucas’s face pale as sweat rolled down his neck. From the state he was in, it was safe to assume that this spell had exhausted all of his mana.

[Crater]

Elijah held out his staff as he finished the spell. The ground underneath the wave of vines crumbled and a hole, meters deep, formed, deterring the vines from reaching us for now.

[Aqua Siphon]

Samantha fell to her knees as she released the powerful spell.

Aqua Siphon was a frightening spell that sucked the surrounding area of its water. The only drawback of this spell was the amount of mana it used for the limited amount of space it could affect.

The rampant vines that were crawling out of the crater Elijah had conjured began withering at a rapid pace as the moisture was sucked out from them.

Before the withering could spread, however, the rest of the mist surrounding the cave swirled and gathered, sucked in by the vines. The shriveled, brown vines were once again turned a healthy green, filled with vigor, and seemed angrier than before.

“N-No way...” Samantha’s face drained of color as she slumped in resignation.

The positive, however, was that the mist that had surrounded us was being absorbed into the huge wave of vines, clearing our limited view.

As the vines continued to hungrily consume the mist, we were all finally able to see what exactly it was we had been going up against.

Standing more than twenty meters tall, high above our heads was a colossal mana beast. With a humanoid structure that oddly resembled a centaur, it towered over us like a massive building.

While it seemed to be made up completely of densely packed and intertwined vines, the top half of its body was that of an armored man holding a drill-like lance that came to a menacing point just over our heads. Its lower body was that of a horse, but rather than legs, its limbs consisted of the countless vines we had been battling against. Two green eyes peered down at us, filled with unbridled enmity.

I swallowed hard, staring mindlessly up at the imposing figure. For the last hour, the seven of us had been literally battling against the toes of this mana beast.

“I-I’ve read about a monster that looked something like this,” Samantha stuttered in horror, sinking to her knees in complete resignation. “I think th-that’s an S class mana beast called the e-elderwood guardian!”

“It can’t be, right? What the hell would an S class mana beast be doing here?” Reginald almost dropped his giant hammer as he peered up at the elderwood guardian in dread, and with good reason too. An S class mana beast meant that it was on par with an SS class adventurer or at least ten S class adventurers.

“I-Isn’t that Kriol?” Reginald exclaimed as he pointed a shaking finger at the lifeless torso and legs sticking out of the body of the mana beast.

“W-We’re doomed...” Brald had a crazed expression on his face as he began laughing madly at the giant mana beast. He had already lost his arm and he was worn out from the fighting. This was probably the last straw for the veteran adventurer.

“We have to run.” Jasmine yanked my hand, gesturing me to run back in the direction of the doors we had come from.

“What about them?” I called out, my eyes glued to the elderwood guardian.

She remained silent, tugging harder for me to move.

I knew that rationally, it made the most sense to get away from here as fast as possible. Hell, I wasn’t even close to any of them, and I certainly wasn’t chummy with Lucas. But it wouldn’t be right to betray their trust in me as their leader.

Suddenly, the elderwood guardian thrust his giant drill lance at us, creating a gale of wind just from its movement.

[Earthen Shield]

Elijah conjured a flat wall of earth from the ground, angled slightly so that the force of the drill would be parried away from us.

A thunderous explosion resounded from the impact as the beast's lance shattered the thick, earthen slab.

Picking up his hammer, Reginald charged forward, seizing the opportunity that Elijah had created. His giant warhammer glowed a brilliant yellow as he roared out in desperate resolve. "Go back to the d**n hole you crawled out from, you oversized tree! Impact Barrage!"

The giant hammer began vibrating fiercely in his hands as he unleashed his attack down at the elderwood guardian's lance.

It felt like a warship had just fired a massive storm of cannons as the whole cavern shook. The sheer force of Reginald's spell had reduced the beast's weapon to shreds.

Just as he was about to land on the ground, the broken vines that made up the lance whirled like tentacles and surrounded him. "GAAAH! HELPP!! NOOOO!"

The tendrils that had once formed the giant lance swirled around to mold back into its original shape, eating up Reginald in the process. The gruesome sound of bones snapping resounded from within the weapon as the tendrils continued to intertwine, slithering around each other like pythons to complete the shape of the lance.

Samantha, who had been preparing a spell to our left, lurched forward and heaved what little food she had consumed since coming down here as the sound of Reginald's body being ground filled the cavern.

D**n it all.

The lance had formed back into its original shape, with the addition of Reginald's body and weapon inside it. Looking up, I could see that the elderwood guardian didn't have a mouth but just from the look in its eyes, I felt like it was gloating, refreshed by the fact that it had caught one more insect that had been bugging him.

I grabbed Samantha, who had been petrified from shock, and lifted her up on my shoulders. "Jasmine! Grab Brald and let's run! Lucas, Elijah! You have to try and block any incoming attacks until we can make it out of here!"

Jasmine picked up the one-armed adventurer who was still laughing psychotically and we look back to see that the elderwood guardian was looking directly at us.

"We need to move!" I barked, hurrying everyone. However, just as I willed mana into my body, a blast of fire hit me square in the chest, sending me flying back as Samantha tumbled off to the side.

While my body, reinforced with mana and from the assimilation of Sylvia's Dragon Will, prevented me from sustaining serious injuries, my breath had been knocked out from the almost point-blank spell cast by Lucas, the only one possibly capable of doing this.

Furious and baffled by the sudden betrayal, I had to practically peel my eyes away from the blond brat that was already running away to look for Jasmine. She had been knocked back much farther from the spell and was unconscious, but she didn't seem to be dead.

"What the hell are you doing?" Elijah cried out for the first time, pointing his staff at Lucas who was already almost at the entrance of the cave.

"You think I'd risk my life to help all of you escape? Be honored that you'll be the valiant heroes that stalled the beast enough for me to escape! I'll tell everyone all about your courageous deeds!" he scoffed, turning back just to shoot me an arrogant smirk before conjuring a smokescreen.

Another deafening crash reverberated as the ground split around us from the force of the elderwood guardian stabbing its lance where Lucas had just been. The smokescreen subsided, but Lucas was already gone, closing the door behind him.

"That spineless a*s!" Elijah cursed, holding his glasses in place as the cavern continued to tremble from the force of the beast's attack. The endless vines that made up the mana beast's limbs managed to climb out of the crater left from Elijah's spell and approach us.

Suddenly, the elderwood guardian let out a baleful roar, gripping my body with a fear incomparable to any of the other mana beasts I had faced before. Its green eyes turned a menacing red and the tendrils that made up its body turned gray and disassembled to form a tsunami of vines, destroying everything in its path as it made its way to us.

"HAHAHA!" Brald's maniacal laughter faded as a wave of vines consumed his body.

Elijah's usual terse expression was nowhere to be found as his face slackened, turning several shades lighter, while Jasmine was still unconscious from taking Lucas's spell directly. The fact that she was still knocked out meant that Lucas managed to hit her before she had the chance to reinforce herself with mana.

I started calculating the options I had left. Even if I were to use the first phase of my beast's will, I wouldn't last long enough to save everyone and carry them out.

I bit my lip, frustrated that I allowed myself to fall into such a crappy situation. I had no choice but to use it.

I didn't know how severe the recoil of using it would be but I had no choice but to try.

Taking a deep breath, I closed my eyes, searching deep within my mana core for the source of Sylvia's slumbering power. Releasing it, I was met with an almost strangling amount of energy as my body burned.

The world around blurred as a near-palpable aura of different colors enveloped me.

"Phase Two," I let out a strained whisper. "Dragon's Awakening."

The Beginning After The End – Chapter 34: Dire Tombs III

Undergoing Dragon's Awakening seemed to startle Sylvie, who was now frantically asking me what had happened from wherever she was.

It's fine, Sylv. I want you to stay away for now and if anything happens, go back to the Helsteas' house for me.

'No! I'm going to go towards you now, Papa. Hold on!' I could sense Sylvie getting closer but she was still a few dozen kilometers away.

Stay away, Sylv! Please! I need someone to tell my family what happens just in case, I transmitted, the voice in my head coming out desperate.

I didn't know if I was going to make it out of this alive, and I didn't want my family wondering what happened and why the ring activated.

'Be careful...'

Thanks, Sylv.

One of the abilities of my first phase, Acquire, allowed me to temporarily separate myself from the space and time around me, which seemed to also be one of Sylvia's innate skills. That phase was limited in many ways because I wasn't a dragon. The limited mana I had access to, as well as the physical burden the ability placed on me, restricted what I could actually do when I activated the 'Acquire' phase.

The most efficient way to best use this phase—I realized when I was training with Grandpa Virion—was by utilizing the Thunderclap Impulse spell alongside it. I would activate my first phase in short millisecond bursts while the reaction time of my body was increased dramatically from the lightning-attribute skill; this allowed me to react and counter almost anything. That was the most efficient way I could think of, since I couldn't affect anything that was "frozen" while the first phase was activated. Even though I wasn't able to keep it up for long, that was my biggest trump card. The fact that the first phase of my beast will wasn't noticeable by those around me made it all the more useful.

I thought back to the time at the auction house when I had first used the 'Acquire' phase on someone else. Sebastian wasn't able to communicate with anyone besides me since I separated us from the time and space of those around us. I only lasted a few seconds before I ended up crippled in bed the next day.

Right now, though, was one of those times when my first phase wouldn't be so useful. No matter how fast I could react to this tsunami of vines, I wouldn't be able to dodge or escape from it in one piece.

There was no other choice.

As I unleashed the dormant power of Sylvia's will deep inside my mana core, I felt every pore in my body open as a surge of mana began raging in and out of my body.

The space around me distorted and the ground below my feet began cracking from the mana surrounding my body.

Color drained from my vision as I was only able to see in shades of gray. The only colors I was able to see were from the numerous particles of mana in the atmosphere around me, all shimmering according to their corresponding elements.

The surge of mana that had been rampaging around me suddenly got sucked up and compressed into my body as the feeling of insurmountable power overwhelmed me. The sense of superiority over everything, living or not, in this universe, almost drove me crazy. I suppressed the growing temptation to obliterate everything around me out of sheer mania.

“Kuh!” I gasped aloud.

The mana in the atmosphere seemed to bend to my will, as if even nature was now under my command.

Phase Two. Dragon’s Awakening... Integrate.

The golden runes, the same markings that Sylvia once had, ran down my arms and back with a burning sensation. I could see my hair growing longer, flowing down to my shoulder, as the once auburn color of my hair turned a bright luminescent white, swaying from the swirl of energy constantly encompassing me. In a way, it was like my body was becoming more like Sylvia’s.

After calming the voice inside my head that suggested I go on a rampage, I examined my surroundings. Jasmine and Elijah were the only ones left. Elijah was beside Jasmine now, who was still out of breath and sweating in pain, supporting her with his shoulders. Elijah was staring at me with a dazed expression, his once serious face almost comical as his glasses drooped down his broken nose.

Another thunderous crash jolted my attention back to the task at hand.

The tsunami of vines that made up the elderwood guardian expanded as a face formed within the wave. The face bore down at me balefully, ignoring everyone else but me. The mana beast that once looked at us like we were insects now displayed a trace of fear.

“Let’s play,” I growled, revealing a smirk.

The world moved around me in slow motion as I leaped, willing wind into the soles of my feet. I instantly cleared the distance between the elderwood guardian and myself as the storming gale I propelled myself with left a crater bigger than the spell Elijah had used.

[Thunderclap Impulse]

A surge of black lightning coiled around my body as I effortlessly dodged the thousands of vines that shot out at me.

Every vine that the tendrils of black lightning touched instantly disintegrated and withered away, but for every vine that crumbled, dozens replaced it. Using the vines that were shooting at me as a foothold, I breezed through the onslaught of thorn-covered vines as thick as my body, drawing nearer to the core of the elderwood guardian.

I could already feel the recoil from using the second phase as my body began trembling and I held back the need to vomit blood.

It was time to end this.

“White fire,” I muttered.

My hands ignited and became engulfed in a blazing white flame that seemed to freeze the moisture in the air around it. This was the most powerful offensive skill that I had in my arsenal, but one that was also the hardest to control. While my Lightning Attribute skills were focused more towards one-on-one combat, I geared my ice attribute techniques for a more widespread form of destruction, just in case the situation arose.

The white fire ablaze in my hands grew larger as I absorbed the now-visible specks of water attribute mana particles into my body. Using the last of my strength, I released my final skill.

[Absolute Zero]

The elderwood guardian, who was in the form of a giant wave of entangled vines, rapidly became encased in ice as the very atoms that made up the mana beast froze in place where the white fire had spread.

Exploding forth the black lightning around me, deadly coils of dark electricity traced through the frozen tsunami of vines and instantly shattered it, leaving only the beast’s mana core.

The second phase wore off as I heaved out a mouthful of blood. As my body began plummeting down, I couldn’t help but admire the beauty of the shimmering fragments of ice that once made up the legendary S class mana beast; It had the surreal effect that one would only see in a dream.

As my consciousness faded, the last thing I heard was the distant echo of Sylv’s cry in my head.

As soon as I woke up, I immediately wished I could be unconscious again. An intense wave of searing pain spread all over my body, leaving me helplessly immobile as a stream of tears rolled down my cheeks. I vomited both blood and the remains of the little food I had eaten since arriving at the dungeon. Every muscle, every pore, every fiber of my body felt like it was getting sawed slowly by a scalding blade.

Without even the strength to utter a cry of pain, I just cursed miserably in my mind.

“You’re awake!” A voice called out from beside me.

Focusing all of my will into staying awake, I ignored the voice.

After a moment of hollow silence, I managed to utter a few sounds.

“G-Glove. My glove,” I practically coughed out, turning my head to the side so I wouldn’t choke on my own blood.

“What about your glove?” I could see Elijah’s face now as he removed the glove my parents had given me from my hand.

“B-Break one of the c-crystals on the glove and give... me.” I almost passed out from the pain again, but before I did, Elijah managed to understand and follow my stuttered instructions.

A pleasant surge of soothing light enveloped my body, and the once unbearable pain eased enough so I could calm down a little. I tried to get up but my body, once again, refused to listen. Lying motionless on

my back, I assessed the situation now, since my cognitive abilities were no longer completely focused on enduring the pain.

Around us, it was dark and cramped, with the only source of light coming from a small fire in the middle of our small group.

“Where’s Jasmine?” I croaked, struggling to turn my neck as I searched for her. As another wave of pain clenched at my insides, I was reminded of the time when I was four and had fallen off the cliff.

Good, friggin’ times.

Elijah pointed to other end of the small shed we were huddled in. “She’s over there.”

Just barely lifting my head, I was able to spot Jasmine lying against the far wall. Her face was wrinkled in pain as beads of sweat littered above her brows.

“She was hit a lot harder by Lucas’s spell and her body wasn’t fortified with mana. I had a medical kit on me so I treated the external burn on her belly but I think the burn had caused some internal damage.” Elijah looked wearily at Jasmine, straightening his glasses.

Turning my head back, I could see that the boy wasn’t in great shape. His usual trim, black hair was now a bird’s nest as cuts and trailed of dried blood covered his face and body. His nose, that had been broken had turned a sickly purple and his clothes were shredded.

He was hurt and tired, but he was able enough to get out of here. Yet, he stayed, ignoring treating his wounds while focusing his efforts on keeping Jasmine and me alive.

I wanted to thank Elijah for helping us but I held off until I could talk in complete sentences; if I told him now, it would only come off as strained and pathetic. Until then, I could only simmer in my own fumes, thinking of that spineless, traitorous worm called Lucas.

“Use my glove on Jasmine too. Crack another one of the gems on it and press it against her wounds,” I explained through gritted teeth.

“Got it.” Elijah shuffled over to Jasmine and I heard a faint hum from the light that brightened the small cave we were in.

Jasmine’s ragged breathing had turned noticeably steadier. Using my limited strength to look at her again, I saw that her previous strained expression had calmed.

“I think she’ll be fine with a few hours of rest.” A rare smile escaped Elijah’s terse face.

‘Papa! You’re awake now! Are you okay? I’m almost there!’ Sylvie’s voice chirped in my head.

I’m fine now. I thought you said you had to finish up something... are you done with that? I asked my infant dragon.

‘...No. I’m almost done, though! I’ll find you after I’m done! I miss you, Papa...’ The disappointed voice of Sylvie almost tempted me to just tell her to come here now, but I held it in. I could feel the changes in Sylvie’s body somehow, and I knew she was going through something important.

"I didn't think that the legendary masked swordsman, Note, would be someone around my age." My bespectacled companion's voice stirred my train of thought.

"My mask!" My voice turned a little frantic as I noticed for the first time that my face was bare.

"S-Sorry. It got blown off while you were falling. I couldn't help looking while I was moving you two to safety." I saw him scratch his cheek, something akin to embarrassment expressed on his face.

"What about my sword? Did you see the black stick that I carried around?" My eyes darted around through the dim lighting.

I spotted the outline of my sword as Elijah pointed a bit to the right of the sleeping Jasmine. "Yeah, it's beside Jasmine. I didn't know if it was valuable or not but I kept it just in case."

I just let out a deep breath, a rather heavy weight lifted from my chest. "Thank you... for everything. For saving Jasmine and me and retrieving my sword when you could've easily escaped by yourself. Thank you."

"Haha... If I left you in that half-dead state, that would've put me on the same level as that a*s, Lucas, then wouldn't it?" He shot me a grin.

"Heh, not nearly." I let out a pained laugh.

Elijah inched closer, sitting down next to me now. "Why did you stay anyways? I saw Jasmine pulling you to escape. I felt like you two could've escaped at that time."

I couldn't help but pause at his question. "A king never betrays the people who trust him." I winked, which made him scoff. "And..." I hesitated, "...I promised someone very important to become a better person and to cherish the people around me."

"Pfft. You sound like an old man. We're pretty young...I wonder what kind of life you had until now to have promised someone that," Elijah's tense face was a lot more relaxed now, his once stone face full of life.

"I sometimes wonder myself, haha. How long have I been out for anyways?" I changed the subject.

"It's hard to tell but definitely more than a day. Jasmine woke up a few times in between, but just barely enough so I could feed her," he answered, leaning back on the wall.

I wiggled myself up painfully to sit against the wall as well, Elijah helping me, when I noticed that the wall was made of metal.

"This doesn't seem to be naturally made. Where are we?" I feel the cold surface of the wall, tracing it back to the ground.

"I conjured it. I think the elderwood guardian's body was supporting the whole level of the cave we were in. After you defeated it, the ceiling crumbled, and once you landed on the ground, I built a small shelter to keep the rocks from burying us alive." He let out a sigh. Until now, he hadn't given away a single trace that he was a deviant, and a rather particular one at that.

Instead of being surprised, though, my mind somehow felt at ease. Ever since I had met him, something had felt weird. Like we had held some sort of connection somehow. I guess him being a deviant was the reason why. "I thought only dwarves were able to manipulate metal... and even then, I was taught that they could only manipulate existing metal, not create and conjure it."

"So much for keeping secrets, eh?" Elijah chuckled, sinking further down, a tired look on his face.

"Tell me about it," I scoffed with a grin, holding in the pain as my body protested at even the slightest movements.

"All right...but you have to tell me what the hell you did back there as well. Your hair turned white! A- And your eyes...they were glowing purple. There were these glowing symbols that appeared on your body too!"

I didn't know that my eyes had turned purple, but merely nodded in agreement and let him continue.

"I'm from the Darv Kingdom, but I'm not really sure where I originally came from. The elder that took care of me since I was little always avoided the subject of my parents so I never got a clear answer. The only memories of my childhood came in painful flashes that feel like they've been locked away somehow. About a year ago, when I had awakened, I created such a big implosion that my whole room just vanished. After getting trained for a little while, I found out I was abnormally better in earth attribute spells than any other elements... like, to the point where I wouldn't be able to cast anything but the most elementary spells in water, fire, or wind...even now." Elijah stared blankly at the palms of his hands.

"Since I had awakened, my mana core has been condensing all on its own at a rapid pace. I don't even need to meditate for some reason. The elder that took care of me sent me to the Kingdom of Sapin as a representative and told me to make a name for myself and get along with the humans, but honestly, I don't know why I'm doing this. After I broke into the dark orange stage, I had this weird feeling surge up in my body and before I knew it, a field of metal spikes conjured around me. I happened to be alone when it occurred so thankfully, I didn't kill anyone... but ever since then I've been pretty careful... and scared. Scared of what I am and scared of what I can do. I was excited at first about how strong I could be, but even now, I can barely control my powers. You know... I thought maybe I was half-dwarf at one point, but I-I just don't know what I am anymore."

I stared at Elijah, noticing that his hands were trembling as he quickly squeezed them into fists to control himself.

I just laid back, silently. I wasn't going to pretend like I understood him, and anything I said now would just be empty words of comfort.

"Sometimes, I get this feeling.... like what I can do right now isn't even the limit. I know it may sound weird but I get this itch that there's something more to me deep inside, and that once I can control that power, I'll know what I really am...I'm sorry, haha...this ended up being a therapy session for me, didn't it?" And like that, the bespectacled boy that tried so hard to keep a stern, cold façade turned out to be fragile on the inside.

I gritted my teeth as I willed my broken body to sit upright to face Elijah. Peering into the boy's eyes, I saw a trace of desperation but also gentleness, and a firm pride in himself that reassured my decision.

Years of being a king, representing my country, meeting all different kinds of people—I got the hang of being able to see the type of person someone was, and my impression of Elijah was that he could be someone I could trust.

“I’m a quadra-elemental augments with two deviances: ice and lightning,” I stated in an even tone. Before he had the chance to even react to the landmine I had just set off, I continued. “I’m also a beast tamer. What you saw back there was me releasing my beast will.”

The hand that Elijah had been leaning on slipped and his head crashed against the cold, hard steel.

“Holy—Ouch!” He got back up, rubbing his head.

“I thought I was a freak but I guess you win. W-Wait... how old are you?” he asked.

“I turned eleven a couple of months ago.”

“No way! I’ll be twelve in a few months! I don’t know my exact birth date but the elder just made my birthday the day he found me, January 10th. You know my name is Elijah, but I don’t know yours. What’s your name?” He stuck out his hand as a sign of friendship.

Grasping his hand, I responded with a pained smile. “Arthur. Arthur Leywin, but just call me Art.”

For the next several hours, we exchanged stories. Elijah’s childhood wasn’t that eventful before his awakening. He stayed with the elder since the dwarf children weren’t too fond of mingling with humans. Because of that, Elijah had spent most of his time reading various books. Listening to him talk and just hearing about his life, I could understand why he was a lot more mature for someone his age. He only talked with adults—mostly the elder that took care of him—and just living in a society where almost everyone would rather not have anything to do with you made him grow up a lot faster than he should have.

I broke the last gem of the glove to relieve the pain again when Jasmine woke up. As soon as her eyes opened and she saw that I was awake, she shot up and pulled me into a firm, and agonizing, hug. I was about to say something when I felt drops of tears fall on my neck.

What the hell, I could endure a few more seconds of pain.

“I’m sorry I couldn’t protect you...” was all she could manage to say as she held back her s**s.

“It’s okay, Jasmine. I was the one being stubborn. I’m sorry I dragged you into this mess with me.” I patted her back.

Had she always been this small?

Knowing her since I was a child, I had always assumed she was bigger than I was, but in my arms now was a frail woman.

After she had regained her composure, I shakily stood up to my feet, placing a hand on Jasmine and Elijah’s shoulders. “Let’s go home, guys.”

The Beginning After The End – Chapter 35: Rash Actions and Limits

With both Jasmine and Elijah supporting my powerless body, we had managed to make our way back to the surface of the cavern where we fought the elderwood guardian. The once serene field of grass was in ruins as toppled trees and fallen stalactites lay scattered and splintered amongst fissured grounds.

“Do you think anyone else survived?” I asked, carefully scanning the mess around us.

“Well, Reginald and Brald were both frozen together with the mana beast from the last attack you used. I wasn’t close enough to save Samantha either, after she got knocked off of you and landed near the elderwood guardian. I conjured a metal shelter to keep her safe from the debris but I’m not sure if she was able to survive,” Elijah reported.

Between the after effects from using the second phase and worrying about Jasmine, I was a bit ashamed to say that I hadn’t really thought about the rest of the party. I guess when I didn’t see anyone else in the shelter with us, I immediately assumed they didn’t make it.

“I don’t think we’ll be able to help Samantha in time, even if she is alive by the time we find her under all of this mess,” I sighed. “We still need to find the elderwood guardian’s beast core.”

“I think I’ll be able to help with the first problem.” Elijah knelt down, placing a palm on the ground. “Give me a few minutes.”

“Scan,” the bespectacled boy muttered as a thin wave of mana spread out of his hand.

[Earth’s Pulse]

The spell that Elijah had just invoked, as far as I knew, was usually made to scan the ground for signs of approaching enemies. Usually, the caster would be able to hear footsteps and, if he was that skilled, perhaps distinguish the number of footsteps. However, to encompass not only the surface of the floor, but the ground beneath it, I couldn’t help but become more and more intrigued by this boy.

After a few, tense minutes, Elijah’s furrowed brows lifted into an expression of surprise. “I know where Samantha is and her heart’s still beating!”

A sleek, metallic tent rose from the ground at Elijah’s invocation and opened up in front of us to reveal Samantha.

By the state the conjurer was in, she was just barely hanging in there. Both her legs had been broken clean in multiple locations from where the elderwood’s tendrils had grasped her. Splinters of white jutted out from the b****y mess that were her legs as a milky, yellow pus indicated that her wounds had already become infected.

The good news, if we could even call it that, was that only her legs had incurred serious damage. The rest of her body had cuts and bruises but was otherwise unharmed.

Elijah’s face contorted in horror at the sight as he immediately turned around and lurched forward to vomit.

Jasmine rushed towards her and knelt, not knowing what she had to do to help her.

Limping toward Samantha, I checked her neck for her pulse and placed a hand on her forehead. “Well, she doesn’t have a fever yet and her pulse is steady enough where I don’t think her life will be in danger anytime soon. The silver lining is that she’s unconscious.”

“Some silver lining,” Elijah coughed as he convulsed into another dry heave.

As Jasmine carefully cradled the unconscious Samantha in her arms, I thought back to when the peppy conjurer had made attempts at striking up a conversation with her. With the two of them being the only girls, Samantha was relentless in her pursuit at befriending the brusque Jasmine. Eventually, Jasmine had started to respond, even smiling at times.

I thought about our next course of action. If we wanted to get Samantha to safety, I would need to give up on looking for the beast core for now. However, with Samantha in her state and my body being barely capable of standing on its own, the best thing to do was for Elijah and Jasmine to take Samantha to a medic before coming back down for me.

“Elijah,” I called out to my friend, who was now gasping for air.

Just as I was about to give my instructions, a thundering roar rumbled throughout the cavern, shaking a few stalactites loose from the ceiling.

“What now?!” Elijah groaned, more in resignation than in fear.

‘Papa! I’m here!’ Sylv cried out in my mind.

“It’s okay, Elijah,” I coaxed, as Jasmine lowered the dagger she had already unsheathed.

Despite the childlike voice that rang in my head, the dragon that stood before me was far from anything akin to a child.

I let out a whistle. “Wow, Sylv. You gained weight... and height, and width.”

Sylvie, the small cat-like dragon that had always sat on top of my head was now almost the spitting image of the dragon I named her after.

Her body wasn’t as large as Sylvia’s, but it was still over eight meters long. I could now say with full confidence that Sylvie was indeed a dragon. Her scales had an obsidian-black sheen, reflecting the light from the dungeon in an almost divine way. The two horns that sprouted out of her head were sharper and even more menacing than the titan’s horns I had seen years ago. With wings similar to Sylvia’s—except with pitch-black feathers—and blood-red spikes that protruded along the ridge of her spine, she exuded a menacing, if not baleful, aura around her. The once adorable face and muzzle of hers was now elegant and sharp, her black sclera and yellow irises reminding me of a particularly bright topaz shining in the dead of night.

Sylv’s powerful limbs—armored with jagged spikes at the elbows and knees—lifted as she approached me with a graceful poise, despite her large size. She lowered her head that was as large as my torso, bringing her snout close to mine.

Suddenly, her snake-like tongue shot out as she licked my face with the force to lift me from the ground.

“My God, your breath is foul, Sylv,” I sputtered, barely able to keep myself upright.

'Hehe!' Sylv's childish giggle rang in my head.

"Is that a wyvern? But it has four limbs. It can't be, right? Is that a d-d-d—"

"I'm pretty sure she's a dragon," I finished for the dumbfounded Elijah.

He stared up at the sight of the fearsome beast, his face filled with more horror than when he had seen the elderwood guardian.

Jasmine, who had already known about my bond, was still trembling at the sight of my juvenile dragon as she clutched Samantha close to her chest.

"Elijah, this is my bond, Sylvie." I stretched my hand out to rub my dragon's snout, causing her hind leg to thump the ground in pleasure.

I couldn't help but chortle at how little Sylvie had changed on the inside despite her dramatic transformation.

Turning to face Elijah, I put on a grim face. "Jasmine already knew about this, but I want you to promise to keep this a secret as well. Dragons have been thought to have been extinct for centuries now, so if anyone were to suddenly see Sylvie... well, you know what greed can do to someone."

Elijah nodded frantically in response, his glasses hanging loose on his crooked nose.

"We need to hurry, though. It worked out well that Sylvie came when she did. Let's move Samantha on Sylvie's back." I was barely able to stand up on my own now, but walking more than a few steps was out of the question.

I watched as Elijah and Jasmine carefully loaded the unconscious conjurer onto Sylv's back before they helped me up as well.

It was decided that only Samantha and I would ride Sylv to the first cavern of the dungeon while Jasmine and Elijah would follow close behind.

The journey back up only took a few hours compared to the full day we needed when we had travelled down.

'Sylv, can you still transform?' I asked as we ascended up toward the entrance of the dungeon. My mind was spinning, trying to come up with a way to protect her from greedy nobles in case she couldn't, but thankfully, she said that she could still change into a miniature form.

'What did you do during this time, anyway? How did you grow so quickly?' I sent Sylv while lying down against her long neck.

'I hunted a lot of monsters and ate their mana cores! I missed you a lot. I'm sorry I couldn't protect you while you were here.' Another gust of wind formed beneath us as she flapped her wings down, accelerating towards our destination.

It seemed like her body wasn't able to grow without consuming mana cores, which reminded me of the beast core the elderwood guardian had dropped. At this point, I could only hope that it would stay hidden from adventurers until I went back down.

When we arrived at the first cavern—where the batrunners had been—I preparing myself to fight a couple of them in this crippled state. However, to my surprise, as soon as the batrunners saw Sylvie, they became so terrified, they simply buried their heads in the ground off in the opposite corner of the cave.

Jasmine and Elijah arrived a little less than an hour later, both heaving for breath. Sylv's body illuminated as she shrank back down into the size of a kitten at my mention, but I noticed the change in her appearance even in this form. Her red spikes had disappeared and she was pitch black—apart from her sharp yellow irises. All-in-all, she resembled a demonic, but harmless, black cat.

Sputtering out a series of pained coughs, Samantha stirred awake. As soon as she had become conscious enough to feel the pain in her legs, her eyes widened as she gasped from the agony. She had her arms wrapped around herself as she trembled.

"Y-You guys all made it," she croaked, her body trembling, and her face contorted from the pain. Her face was pale and I could tell she was beginning to burn up by the cold sweat that rolled down her forehead. Her lips were white and cracked as deep bags weighed down beneath her once bright eyes.

"Stop talking," I ordered. "You need to save your energy. Don't worry, we'll get you help soon."

Ignoring me, she carefully reached into her robe, pulling out my mask and something else. "Look what I f-found."

"That's—" Elijah careened close to Samantha's hand.

"The elderwood's beast core," I finished, gently taking it from Samantha. "Nice work. I'll hold onto this until I get the chance to sell it. I think splitting it amongst us would be the best way."

"Are you kidding me?" Elijah shook his head. "I don't want it."

"Me neither. You deserve it, Arthur," Jasmine agreed.

"What? You guys don't want—"

"I'm just happy to be alive. I think it's fair that the one who killed it gets to reap the rewards," Samantha whispered, her consciousness wavering.

I studied the dull green stone, webbed with intricate lines of gray. "Thanks everyone."

Samantha's lips curled up into a faint smile before she fell asleep again in Jasmine's arms.

I put the mask on my face and turned my gaze to my guardian. "Jasmine, can you and Elijah go first to the Guild Hall and get help back down here? I'll stay here with Samantha."

With a nod from the two of them, they headed out back up to the surface. Since it would take them at least four hours to send the message and arrive back, I planned on absorbing the elderwood's beast core. With the aid from the powerful core—and with my body that had been assimilated with Sylvia's will—I predicted that I should be able to make a full recovery by the time they came back.

Before I began my meditation with the the beast core, I took out the parchment I had received from the Twin Horns and recorded a message, telling my parents that I'll be coming home soon.

Forcing my unresponsive body into a cross-legged position. I took a deep breath with the elderwood guardian's beast core in my hands, all the while thinking of what I should do with Lucas.

It wasn't enough for me to just settle for petty revenge. I wanted to do something more. He was from a very powerful family of notorious mages and his blood gave him a certain amount of protection from the elves. Of course, with my connections with the royal family, I didn't think it would matter much, but the Wykes family that he was a part of could make things more complicated than I wanted them to be.

I didn't have much time to dwell on my options as I was stirred out of my meditation by the sound of footsteps approaching.

Judging from the uniforms, it was easy to assume that the people that filed in were the medics Jasmine and Elijah had sent. Within the group of medics was Kaspian, the lanky head of a Guild Hall branch. He was snapping orders at the medics and the few guards that he had brought along to protect the medics, just in case.

Hiding the mana core I couldn't finish absorbing, I watched as the medics worked on Samantha. They used a mixture of herbs to anesthetize her and pushed back the bones into the right place. The field of medicine wasn't that advanced in this world so I wasn't sure that they would be able to fully heal Samantha's legs, but I realized my worries were unnecessary when I saw an emitter begin working on her.

Kaspian walked towards me as I stood up. "Good evening, Mr. Note. I didn't expect for us to be meeting like this. Ms. Flamesworth has told me the situation and I know how you must feel."

"Oh, do you now? Then would you kindly inform me the current location of Lucas so that I may properly respond to his actions against our party?" I replied through gritted teeth. Despite Kaspian's mild tone, I knew that he had personally come here to stop me from going after Lucas.

"I must advise you, Mr. Note, to refrain from taking actions against Mr. Wykes... right now." He shook his head, confirming my assumption.

"And why not 'right now'? My identity is a secret and I have the capability to easily erase that bug's existence. Do you think you have the power to protect him from me?" My gaze was unrelenting as I took a step toward the thin man.

"Of course, I know I don't possess the power to fight against you when you're at your full strength, but I assure you that I can pose a threat to you right now," he calmly replied, straightening his glasses. "But even if I could, I wouldn't need to. Mr. Note, I am warning you because—believe it or not—I carry the obligation to care for you since you are affiliated with Ms. Flamesworth, even if she is the estranged daughter of the house. The Wykes are the type of people that will carry out revenge in the most extreme and brutal manner. Assuming that you do kill their precious son, Lucas, I know right now, you do not possess the power to kill the whole Wykes House. Even if they don't know your identity, that won't stop them from killing anyone that has had anything to do with you. This includes Ms. Flamesworth and the people she's affiliated with, the Twin Horns. Going further than that, I believe the Wykes will further their revenge against you by going against all of the people close to the Twin Horns party, which includes Reynolds Leywin and his family."

I could feel the blood running down my fists as my nails dug deeper into my palms.

He had me.

“Like I said, Mr. Note, I wish to be on your side. What I said about the Wykes Family is all from previous events in the past so I can assure you that they will stop at nothing from wiping out anyone that had to do with you, even if it they weren’t directly related. Until the day you hold the power and authority to protect the people you care for from them, I must advise you from acting against them for now. With that, I’ll take my leave. The Adventurer, Samantha, must be taken back to a facility to be properly cared for.” Giving me a curt bow, he walk away towards Samantha, leaving me with a bitter taste in my mouth.

I could only laugh at the pitiful state I was in. He was right. Until I could wipe away the whole Wykes House, it would be dangerous for my family and friends if I acted against them. No matter how much of an a*****e he was, it wasn’t worth risking my loved ones.

Through clenched fists, I swore to myself that Lucas would regret this day.

Elijah and Jasmine appeared soon after with solemn expressions, obviously overhearing the conversation I had with the Guild Hall leader.

Each placing a consoling hand on my shoulders, Elijah and Jasmine followed me out of the Dire Tombs with Sylv trailing close behind.

We arrived at the Guild Hall located on the outskirts of the Beast Glades about two hours later. Samantha was resting in the recovery facility as Jasmine, Elijah and I were sprawled on the couches in a private room. Kaspian had temporarily moved from his office in Xyrus to this branch and was seated behind the desk in the room when the door suddenly flew open.

“You guys managed to make it out alive!” Behind a group of barrel-chested adventures posing as guards was Lucas.

Kaspian, seated a few feet away from us, leaned his head on his hand—vexed at the boy’s impertinence—as he locked gazes with me to remind me of our discussion.

Both Elijah and Jasmine sprang up from their seats, weapons ablaze as I remained in my seat. It took an amount of self control that I never knew I had to stop myself from lunging forward and skewering the brat to the door he dared come in through.

At this point, I couldn’t tell whether he was that confident or just plain stupid for not just betraying us, but mocking us immediately after.

I guess he wasn’t completely dumb, since he had the sense to at least bring some backup.

Lucas took a step forward, slapping the guard in front of him to move out of the way. “I wonder how you managed to escape from that terror of a beast. Did you have to sacrifice someone else to save yourselves? That w***e, Samantha, is a cripple now, but she’s alive so I don’t think it was her. I don’t see Brald, though... don’t tell me you sacrificed hi—”

Before he had the time to finish his sentence, my fingers had already let go of the shortsword I had hidden behind me.

The next moment, Lucas let out a shrill scream as he clutched his right ear, blood leaking through the spaces between his fingers.

My backup sword that I had picked out from the Helstea Auction House had impaled itself deep into the wall behind Lucas, barely missing the head of the guard that stood behind him.

At the sounds of the hollow thud and scream, the guards whipped around to make sure their boss was okay before turning back to me with weapons held ready.

I stood up from my seat and walked steadily towards the pale Lucas, the entire room deathly silent.

“W-What do you think I’m paying you for?! Get him!” Lucas hissed, pointing at me with a trembling finger as his other hand still gripped his bleeding ear.

The guard closest to me lifted his axe in position to split me in two when I quickly used the scabbard of the shortsword I had just flung at Lucas to respond.

A sharp snap rang as the end of my scabbard met with the guard’s fingers. With a pained howl, he let go of his axe as he instinctively nursed his broken fingers.

Before the rest of the guards could react, I lunged myself towards the frightened Lucas. I could hear Kaspian gasp behind me in fear that I would cross the line, but my hand merely went to my sword impaled into the wall right behind the boy.

The blonde noble’s eyes nearly bulged outside of their sockets as his face was just inches away from mine.

“My apologies. I merely dropped my sword and wanted it back,” I whispered, my voice coming out deeper and more threatening, thanks to my mask.

I pried the blade out of the wall and sheathed it back into the cover I had used to break the guard’s fingers. Turning around, I sat back on the couch, nonchalantly motioning at Kaspian.

On cue, the guild leader hastily responded. “Now, now! Mr. Lucas, your ear is bleeding heavily. Let me escort you to the medical room to get that fixed up.”

Gently herding the noble brat and his guards out of the room, he turned back to me with an exasperated expression.

“You did well,” Jasmine broke the silence, taking a seat as well. “But I’m afraid you’ve made enemies with one of the strongest houses in the Kingdom of Sapin.”

“That’s fine. He won’t take action from what happened today. Despite that conceited attitude, Lucas is cautious. He knows that right now, if he doesn’t go against me, I won’t do anything more.”

Leaning forward, I gripped tightly at the black sword I had refused to unsheathe until the end. I vowed silently that this wouldn’t be the end.

The Beginning After The End – Chapter 36: Precautions

KASPIAN BLADEHEART’S POV:

After escorting the runt of the Wykes House, I arrived back to my seat, tempted to burn the towering stack of paperwork that had accumulated over the past few days. After taking a deep breath, I slid a parchment from the top of the pile when the faint creak of the door tugs at my attention.

It was that adventurer, Note. Closing the door behind him, his warbled baritone voice whispers out in a barely-discernable sound.

“Mr. Bladeheart, you haven’t forgotten what you said about wanting to truly help me, correct?”

I sharp chill runs down my spine; his seemingly harmless words stabbed into me like a looming threat. Ignoring my angst, I held my stoic facade, straightening my glasses before responding. “Of course. Your personal connection to Mrs. Flamesworth, as well as your own potential, had been regarded favorably by the Guild.”

The masked adventurer, whose identity—or even age—I could not guess, nodded his head. I knew he was somehow connected to the Leywin household but even a thorough background search had turned out fruitless.

“Good,” he answered. “I plan to take a very extensive break from being an adventurer, Kaspian, so I would like to implore you for a favor.”

The way he talked sounded anything like an imploration, but I motioned for him to continue.

“Please, go on,” I said, my curiosity aroused.

ARTHUR LEYWIN’S POV:

After the whole debacle regarding Lucas and his unwholesome actions down in the dungeon, there were a few things that needed to be settled.

For one, Lucas was to be tried for his ‘un-adventurer-like’ conduct, which needed to be held in front of a panel of judges comprised of high-rank guild workers.

Seated in the descending gallery of a small amphitheater-like room, I faced the panel along with Lucas as the elderly robed men behind the raised desk looked through their notes.

After a seemingly endless moment of unnerving silence, one of the elderly men that was taller than the four beside him stood up and cleared his throat. “On behalf of the Adventurer’s Guild and the panel that is present here, I hereby declare the conjurer, Lucas Wykes, formally stripped of his A class ranking for sabotage and endangerment of his party members during a dungeon excursion. Furthermore, he is prohibited from re-enlisting as an adventurer until otherwise stated by the Guild. You may now hand in your card.”

A thick-bearded panel member beside the one that had just spoken banged his gavel, creating a loud echo across the room as Lucas begrudgingly handed his enchanted card.

While normally, the sentencing would be filled with anxious family and friends, Lucas and I were the only ones present besides the judges. I had come to the conclusion that this was to keep news that could slander the Wykes House’s name contained, but after hearing Lucas’s verdict just now, I thought otherwise. Normally, what Lucas had done, down at the Dire Tombs, would be enough for him to be sentenced to imprisonment—on top of getting his title stripped. However, the vague addition that the elder made at the end, about him being prohibited from becoming an adventurer until otherwise stated left for a lot of loose ends.

I could only hold my tongue back and wait for this crooked sentencing to come to an end. Despite the rather lax sentence that Lucas had been given, the noble half-elf brat had an expression stitched on his face as if he'd just swallowed a live frog.

The only silver lining I could see in this was Lucas's family beating some sense into the twerp for shaming his family's name.

Lucas had been pretty riled up from my brazen act of retaliation back at Kaspian's office. Ever since then, I'm sure he had nothing but boiling rage pent up in that little body of his, but after learning from Kaspian that I had defeated the elderwood guardian, rather than escape from it, his rage-fueled vendetta had been filled with doubt.

"Next to be put on trial is the augments, Note. Faced with the clear enmity with Lucas Wykes and possible the whole Wykes Family displayed by the act of aggression against Lucas, on behalf of the panel and the entirety of the Adventurer Guild"—the judge glanced at his peers to his left and right—"I hereby declare a temporary ban from Xyrus City during the entire duration of Lucas Wykes' attendance at Xyrus Academy."

The gavel, once again, boomed throughout the room. To my right, I could feel Lucas's gaze bore into me as he waited for my reaction.

Putting on my best angry voice, I leaned forward on the podium. "Sir! I object to this punishment! Why am I to be reprimanded for Lucas's betrayal at the dungeon?" I slammed my fists down on the bench in front of me. All the while, even from my peripheral view, I could see Lucas's anxious face turn smug from my discontent.

I knew revoking his license didn't mean much to him and with me "out of the way," he didn't have to worry about anything.

"This is not a discussion! We are aware of the circumstances, which is why we chose not to revoke your license. You will be allowed to continue being an adventurer as long as we do not catch you near Mr. Wykes or his family." The judge's stern face glowered fiercer as his sharp gaze pierced through my mask.

"Wait! What about his identity? Wouldn't he be able to easily take his mask off and slip through inside the city and potentially harm me or my family?" Lucas raised his finger at me, now confident enough to push me down even further.

"We have already decided to have his identity recorded once this sentencing is over, Mr. Wykes. You will not be allowed to know of Mr. Note's identity for obvious reasons of ill intent against him or his family while select Guild Hall mages will keep tabs on Mr. Note's whereabouts, masked or not. This is not up for debate. This sentencing is over," another judge declared. All five of them stood up and left before either of us had the chance to refute.

Clicking his tongue, Lucas whipped his head, sending me a threatening gaze before walking with his entourage of guards that were waiting outside the door. Before stepping out of the room, he looked over his shoulder and shot me a look of haughty derision. "If you know what's good for you, you'd best be at least five towns over from me at all times."

"Idle threats as you run away make you seem petty, boy," I shot back. The problem child of the Wykes House turned scarlet as I turned back around to be escorted by the guards. Behind the raised desks that the panel of judges were seated behind was a narrow door that opened with a touch.

"No need to trouble yourselves, gentlemen. I know you all have been dying to get back. I'll escort Mr. Note here out through the back with the guards," the judge who had spoken throughout the trial said.

The rest of the panel must've placed a lot of trust in the man because the four of them graciously left just as we were about to head back. Stepping through the doorway, I readjusted my mask to make sure it wouldn't slip off as one of the judges let out a sigh.

"I trust that this little charade was to your satisfaction, Mr. Note?" His sharp white eyebrows furrowed even deeper.

"Your acting was bit over the top, but I think it was fairly well done," I shrugged. "Thank you for your cooperation."

Shaking his head, he gave me a helpless look. "No need. It wasn't on your behalf that I did this. I sincerely hope that I can trust you not to cause any further trouble? We will not be able to hide the truth from the Wykes Family forever, but as long as you do not go against them, they won't bother with you."

"I'm more careful than I look, Your Honor." I dipped my head in a quick bow. "Kaspian mentioned that there would be a passageway where I can safely remove my 'identity', right?"

"Yes. Your acquaintances await you on the other side." The judge fumbled around with a couple of the books on a nearby shelf and suddenly a passage opened up from the ground.

"I bid you farewell, Mr. Note, and I do hope that you will not forget this act of kindness from the Guild. I predict that there will be a time when we will call upon you for a favor, and it would be much appreciated that you remember what we did for you today."

"I see the top heads of the Adventurer's Guild are sly and crafty," I let out a chuckle. "At least you have the sense to know who to back. I'll remember."

I stepped down the stairs leading to the brief underground passageway as one of the guards closed the entrance behind me.

Opening the door on the other side, I was greeted by a rather painful head-b**t from Sylvie.

"Gah!" I breathed out, clutching my stomach.

"Kyu!" Sylvie chirped as she scuttled to the top of my head. 'How did everything go, Papa? Is it over now? Can we go home?'

Jasmine and Elijah greeted me as well with a faint smile on their faces. "Everything's over. Let's go back home," I said to everyone.

Elijah asked, "Did you not want to visit Samantha?"

"I think it'd be better if I don't visit her. Jasmine, maybe you should stop by the hospital next time to check up on her?" Jasmine, who had remained silent the whole time, gave a slight nod as we continued walking.

We trekked across the border of the Beast Glades toward the nearest teleportation gate. While I had a few mental conversations with Sylvie, both Jasmine and Elijah stayed silent until the site of the gate came into view.

"Well, I guess we should split ways here, right?" Scratching his untidy black hair, Elijah shifted glances between Jasmine and I with a forced smile.

"What?" I spouted in surprise. "You're not coming with us, Elijah? Did you have something you needed to do?"

I automatically assumed that my newfound friend would come with us, but thinking back, I remembered that he wasn't from the Kingdom of Sapin.

"W-What? I mean, I don't really have anything planned but are you okay with me coming along with you? Elijah seemed taken aback by my surprise.

"W-What? I didn't really have anything planned but is it really okay to come along with you?" He straightens his glasses and coughs, trying to cover his embarrassed face.

"Well you and Jasmine should go through the portal separately from me, just in case anyone suspects something, but I thought it'd be good for you to stay with us for a bit before we go to school," I scratched my head.

"We? I-I don't understand. I never had plans to go to school." Elijah's eyes seemed even more lost behind his glasses than before so I filled him in.

"Well, seeing as your goal is to make a name for yourself in Sapin, it doesn't hurt to get yourself an education from Xyrus Academy," I smirked.

Elijah looked at me as if I had misspoken while even Jasmine raised a brow at my idea.

"I'm sorry, I still don't follow. How would I even get into the school? I mean... I might have the qualifications but not the background. Even the fact that I'm from Darv wouldn't give me any leeway to get into the school."

Putting an arm around his neck, I leaned against my friend. "Don't you worry about a thing, my bespectacled little nerd. Let your big brother take care of the small details."

"What big brother? You realize that I'm older than you, right? And what does 'nerd' mean, anyway?" Elijah chortled, throwing a light jab at my ribs. "Besides, I'm not so sure about the idea of going to school with so many students. How would I even fit in after spending my life with those antisocial dwarves?"

Just to sweeten the deal, I added, "You know, Lucas is going to be attending Xyrus Academy. Are you okay with me having all the fun?"

"I agree with Ar...Note. You can always go back to being an adventurer later." Jasmine glanced around to see if anyone heard the mistake she almost slipped out.

“Okay!” he relented as I squeezed him harder. “If you can somehow get me in, I’ll go! Besides, someone’s going to have to hold you back from murdering Lucas on the first day of school!”

“Good! Jasmine, can you take Elijah back to Helstea Manor? I have something I need to do first. I’ll catch up to you guys!” I pushed them toward the portal just a bit ahead.

Jasmine nodded wordlessly and led Elijah away. After they were out of sight, my smile disappeared as I let out a small sigh.

“Come out,” I called out calmly.

With a swish, Kaspian appeared beside me with his sheathed rapier tied to his waist.

“I am glad you took some precautions by sending the two of them away first,” Kaspian nodded approvingly.

“Thanks for getting the judge to play along with the act. Lucas shouldn’t be suspicious anytime soon,” I replied with a nod.

“My pleasure. At this point, I’m simply glad that this has been solved without anyone dying.” Kaspian chuckled, but I sensed his words were serious.

“I’m glad you think that way,” I answered.

“Anyway, here’s a little parting gift from me,” the Guild Hall manager said, handing me a small pouch.

I pulled at the drawstrings, opening the red sack he had given me. Inside was a heap of gold coins enough to make a countryside boy like me faint.

However, I remained silent behind my mask and thanked him for the gift. As I turned and walked away, Kaspian called out from behind. “I advise you to use it to take appropriate precautions, Mr. Note. It’d be unwise to let your guard down, thinking you’ve cleared the mountain.”

Without looking back, I raised an arm and waved back at Kaspian, heading towards the teleportation gate myself with Sylvie perched on my head.

Elijah attending Xyrus Academy wouldn’t draw too much suspicion. Jasmine was close with the Helstea Family now, so having her vouch for Elijah would seem natural. I would make sure not to draw Dawn’s Ballad whenever I was with Lucas on the journey. The only problem was that the brat would be sure to recognize Sylvie; he’d seen the small, feline form of Sylvie back at Guild Hall, after all.

“Sylvie?” I asked in concern as a bright glow emanated from atop my head. Taking her off my head, I could see my bond transforming once more.

Her pitch-black scales turned white as the horns sprouting from her head had completely receded. The scales on her lizard-like tail extended like fur as the scales on her body thinned out as well. As the bright glow subsided, I looked in surprise to see that my bond had once more taken on a complete transformation. The feline-lizard form that she once had been was nowhere in sight, replaced by the form of a fox. As I carefully ran my finger through her back, I could feel a soft pelt where her scales once were. Upon closer inspection, I could see that her fur was actually incredibly thin scales that took on the

appearance of a soft coat over her body. Sylvie's body was almost completely covered in a snowy white pelt as her nose, paws, and the tips of her ears remained black.

'Is this better, Papa?' Sylvie's voice rang in my head as she curled up in my arms.

"How many forms can you change into?" I asked, astounded.

'I don't know, but I'm tired,' she replied. 'Good night.'

"Y-Yeah... Good night, Sylv," I muttered aloud, still baffled at her mysterious abilities. Did all dragons have the ability to alter their forms so completely? I knew her main form was that of a dragon, like the one we saw down at the dungeon, but being able to change her color and size even more wholly than her miniature black form was astounding.

I couldn't help but let out a wry smile at how conveniently my biggest problem had been solved.

Before going into the town the teleportation gate was in, I casted a weak electric current into the air to make sure I wasn't being spied on like I had been earlier. After confirming that I was alone, I removed my mask and coat behind a tree, placing it inside my bag.

Reaching the small town that looked more like an outpost, I weaved my way around the crowd of heavily-armored adventurers and robed merchants calling out the goods that they had collected. Clutching my sleeping bond tightly, I made my way to a random merchant and quickly sold my worn and chipped short sword for a few silver coins. Dawn's Ballad, my unimpressive-looking black stick, was still strapped tightly across my waist as I practically tumbled my way in through the front doors of an artifact shop.

"Welcome to Ecvius Artifacts," the store clerk said on impulse before looking at me. "Oh, hello little boy, are you lost?"

Playing along I shook my head, wiping the sweat off my brows. "No, my father just asked me to buy something for him since we're about to leave town."

"Aww," the woman cooed behind her desk. "How old are you?"

"Eleven," I replied, flashing an innocent smile.

"And you're already going on errands by yourself?" she smiled.

"Well, I have my pet here. But she's sleeping," I replied, cheerily holding up Sylvie, already getting tired of acting like a kid.

"I see, well how can I help you?" The store lady clasped her hands eagerly.

"I'm looking for a small dimensional storage artifact," I answered, surveying the tidy little shop filled with trinkets.

"Oh..." The store clerk looked at me in surprise but she quickly went to the back room behind the desk. "Here we are!"

The lady brought out a small box filled with a few cases. “This is where we keep all of our dimensional storage artifacts,” she answered, unlocking the box. “Was there a particular size that your father wanted?”

As she opened containers one by one, bracelets, rings, necklaces and other accessories sparkled from the various gems that adorned them.

Just like the books I had read about the dimensional storage artifacts, they all seemed to be accessories that one could easily carry around without it being suspicious. This was because these particular artifacts had the ability to store and preserve items inside it, depending on its quality. Some highly-valuable dimensional artifacts were able to hold a wagon’s worth of storage inside and its weight wouldn’t even change.

The prices of these items were astronomical, but for people carrying valuable goods all the time, it was well worth it for them.

None of the books I had read really went into detail on how you could actually create one since most were handed down for generations, but one method was carefully splitting the storage space in a particular dimensional storage artifact and creating multiple lesser artifacts out of it.

“I just need one big enough to store this,” I replied as I held up Dawn’s Ballad for her to see, my eyes still focused on the few dimensional artifacts she had out.

“Hmmm... if it’s only that, I think this ring should do it,” she said, picking out a particular ring. I looked down to see that she had chosen an extravagant gold ring with a diamond imbedded into it, alongside other smaller gems.

“Do you have any that are less flamboyant?” I said, giving the ring back to her.

“Hmmm.” Scratching her head, she combed through the box once more. “Aha! How about this?”

I opened the small box she had given me to see a dull, silver band inside.

“This ring’s storage capacity is actually better than the gold ring I showed you before, but the smith that forged this insisted on leaving the ring in this plain state. This ring probably has enough space to fit your stick and a large luggage bag inside,” she declared proudly, flashing me a very business-like smile.

I didn’t waste any time in my decision. “I’ll take it.”

After haggling with the insistent woman, I managed to buy it for a handful of beast cores that I had picked up over that past year along with two hundred gold coins—and that was only because that was how much my ‘father’ had given me.

My total savings now consisted of a few silver coins and the S class elderwood’s beast core that I had already partly used. I let out a deep, depressed sigh, reminiscing of the times when I could live happily with just a couple of copper coins back in Ashber Town. If Kaspian hadn’t given me the a hundred gold coins to use to ‘take precautions with’ as I left, I wouldn’t have had enough to even afford one.

After slipping the ring into my right thumb, since it was too big for any of my other fingers, I willed mana into both the ring and my sword. Instantly, the black sword glowed and got sucked up into the ring. I did

the same with my mask and coat that was inside my bag and proceeded towards the teleportation gate Jasmine and Elijah had gone through at the center of the town.

The Beginning After The End, Chapter 37: A Son, Brother, and Friend

As I stepped into the teleportation gate, the familiar nauseating sensation hit me. I could never get used to the teleportation gate, despite the number of times I went through it; the feeling of being stuck in a space where I had no control just didn't sit right with me.

Anxiously twiddling the dimension ring loosely dangling on my thumb as the blurred scenery zipped by, I couldn't help but get a headache just thinking about how careful I would have to be once school started; I bought the ring so my sword wouldn't be in plain view. While I never used my teal-bladed sword as an adventurer, I did have it strapped to me in its dormant form at all times. I also caught Lucas eying it a few times with curiosity while we were in the dungeon together. If he saw it again on my person, it would be a dead giveaway.

Arriving at the other side of the gate in Xyrus, I heaved a big breath.

I was home.

Catching a carriage home, I passed by the Academy I would be attending. The premise was enormous and just looking at it from the outside, anyone could tell how much time and resources the Kingdom had put into this place. It seemed like its own separate world inside of the city, with various structures and landscapes changing throughout as I rode along the smooth roads.

"Sir, we have arrived at Helstea Manor." The driver got off and opened the door for me, tipping his hat as I stepped down gently, careful not to arouse my slumbering bond as I handed by driver a few copper coins. Taking one last look, I walked up the stairs I had become so familiar with.

I cradled Sylvie with one arm, feeling for the gentle expansion and retraction of her stomach to make sure she was just sleeping. Ever since her transformation, she had been fast asleep, filling me with unease. After prodding at my bond's mind once more, I knew she was okay—just sleeping heavily.

I hadn't even made it up the stairs when the large double doors flung open with a loud thud. In the center of the entranceway, a little girl stood with her hands resting on her hips like a scolding mother. On her face was an expression I couldn't quite describe; she appeared to be scowling, but flashes of excitement and joy leaked through her obvious facade.

With the same half-squint-half-delighted expression, she gracefully leaped down the flight of stairs and bludgeoned me in the gut with the crown of her head.

I quickly raised my arms to get Sylvie out of harm's way, but I couldn't save myself as the wind quickly escaped from my mouth.

For a moment, we were both silent as I gently stroked Ellie's hair as her face remained buried in my chest.

"Welfom vack," she mumbled.

"Sorry?" I tried to pry my sister off me, but her arms squeezed harder around my waist in refusal to let go.

Ellie looked up with red, tear-filled eyes as she clung onto me like a baby koala. “I said welcome back, Big Brother.”

“Thanks, Ellie. Good to be back,” I replied with a smile. “Now how about you let me go?”

“That depends”—her almond-shaped eyes narrowed—“are you going to leave again?”

Letting out a chuckle, I shook my head. “No, I’m not.”

“Then I’ll let go.” Releasing me from her grasp, she quickly wiped away her tears with her sleeve. She looked at me once more, this time, with a more lively expression. “Come on, let’s go inside!”

She scurried back up the stairs, motioning for me to follow. As I trailed behind her, I couldn’t help but remember how much she’d grown from when I had first met her after coming back from the elven kingdom. Ellie should be about eight right now. Her birthday was a few months before mine so there was always a period where she’d only be three years younger than me. For most people, that wouldn’t matter, but for some odd reason, Ellie never failed to mention after her birthday that we were only three years apart.

As my train of thought shifted to her age and maturity, a sudden realization struck me like lightning. My sister, with her puppy-like eyes that shined brightly in a light sand color, and perky little nose that had become more defined as she lost more of her baby fat, was blossoming into a cute young lady.

This meant that, in a few years—if not sooner, boys would start gaining interest in her.

And when they started gaining interest in her, they’d begin making moves.

It’d start with little things like sharing lunches during snack-time at school. Then it’d escalate into holding hands.

Then, after getting comfortable, the cheeky b*****d might try to sneak a quick peck on my sister’s cheek!

After the cheek, it’d...

Oh no.

My eyes widened in horror as my mind zipped through the future years of Ellie’s adolescence into full womanhood. I couldn’t help but imagine my poor baby sister getting flocked by testosterone-filled boys that only knew how to think with their endocrine system.

I shook my head, trying to dislodge the cancerous thoughts, vowing to myself that I would gladly carry out whatever torturous deed is necessary to any boy—with even a speck of filth in their degenerate minds—who dared to make a move on my sister.

“Arthur!”

The sound of my mother’s voice snapped me back to reality. She and my father came running forward, both with relieved and joyful expressions lined in their faces.

My father, whose body seemed to even be muscular despite his age, scooped me up with a bright grin.

“My boy!” he beamed. “You haven’t grown at all!”

“Your beard’s longer, old man. Trying to match the wrinkles on your face?” I smirked, wrapping my arm around my dad’s neck.

“Hey! That’s my husband you’re talking about!” my mother chided as my father put me back down.

“Now come here.”

My mother wrapped her arms around me in warm embrace. As she let me go, I could tell by her red eyes that she was trying her best to keep her tears back.

“Sorry for worrying you,” I said, seeing the pain in her eyes.

Sniffing a sob back, she looked up and quickly wiped away a stray tear before smiling at me. “You take just after your father, you know that? Always getting into trouble, always worrying me. W-When the ring activated...”

She stopped talking as tears rolled down her cheeks. Still, her smile never went away as she chided me, her eyes peering at me with love and worry.

My father wrapped his arm around Mother’s shoulder, pulling her close. “Your mother couldn’t sleep for days after the ring activated. We both knew you wouldn’t have died that easily, but it couldn’t stop us from worrying.”

“I’m sorry for worrying you,” I repeated as my heart dropped to my stomach.

“Thankfully, the status on the masked swordsman, or Note, was updated at Guild Hall, saying that you and your party arrived at the branch near the Beast Glades,” my father continued, tousling my hair with his free hand.

Ellie, who was hiding behind Father for some reason, took a peek out from behind him.

“I seem to cause nothing but concerns for you guys,” I said with a wry smile before looking at my sister.

“I’m sorry, Ellie, for being away so much and making Mom and Dad cry.”

“I forgive you,” Ellie sniffled, hiding behind our father again.

“It’s a parent’s job to worry for her children,” my mother soothed. “Although, you seem to be fulfilling your end of the bargain a little too well.”

My mother, taking a glance at my little sister, turned to me and whispered just loudly enough for everyone to hear, “And don’t worry about your sister. She was waiting by the window the whole day since your friend, Elijah, came in with Jasmine.”

“Mom!” Ellie gasped. “That was supposed to be a secret!”

My little sister clung hard onto my mother, making her submit as we all laughed.

“I guess that’s my cue?” Elijah chimed in from the top of the stairs leading to the second floor. My newfound friend had been waiting for our little family reunion to end with Vincent and Tabitha.

“Took you long enough to get here. Did you decide to take a small tour before coming here?” Elijah joked as he hopped down the stairs.

“I wanted a break from your unsightly mug,” I retorted, giving him a snide grin. “Where’s Jasmine, anyway?”

“She already went back with the Twin Horns,” he answered, removing his glasses and wiping them with the end of his shirt.

Looking at the bespectacled young man, it was hard for me to recall how inexpressive and cold he appeared to be when I had first seen him in the testing grounds.

“Arthur Leywin! The prodigious son returns!” Vincent clasped my back, locking his arms around me with a tight bearhug.

“We’re glad you’re back safe, Arthur.” Tabitha followed behind him, pulling me into a lavender-scented hug as well.

“Thank you,” I smiled, dipping my head. “For everything, I mean. Taking care of my family and allowing us to stay—”

“Ah,” Vincent interrupted with a finger held up. “You’re going to make this old man sad if you act so formal. Come now, I thought you had finally warmed up to us!”

“He’s right, you know,” Tabitha joined in. “Please, Arthur, your family is a part of our family. No need to distance yourself with formalities. Just think of us as your aunt and uncle.”

“You’re right,” I smiled, stopping myself from apologizing once more.

At her words, I realized that there was one person absent from the Helstea Family. But before I could ask, Vincent caught my gaze and let out a chuckle.

“If you’re looking for Lily, she’s not here.” Vincent had a wicked smile on his face while Tabitha rolled her eyes at him.

“Lily got accepted into Xyrus Academy. She started attending last fall after she turned twelve,” Tabitha filled me in.

“Wow,” I beamed. “So she’s really learning to be a mage! I’m glad!”

Tabitha nodded at this. “Yes. She really wanted to be here when you came back to tell you herself but unfortunately, spring semester started, so she’s stuck in the dorms until break.”

“But it’s all thanks to you, Arthur! Never would’ve figured, after generations of nothing, that a mage would be born into the Helstea House! Now come—all of you—no need to stand around here when we have a perfectly good set of couches in the living room!”

After being herded into the next room over, we began discussing my time as an adventurer.

There were some details that I left out for my family’s sake—I exchanged glances with Elijah when I skipped the part where Lucas betrayed us—but other than that, I made sure to fill them in to the best of my ability.

My sister, who was sitting cross-legged on the couch across from me with Sylvie sleeping in her lap, was wide-eyed the entire time as I recalled the dungeon experience with Elijah. Her eyes practically sparkled at the fantasy-like fable, but it wasn't just her that became enraptured by the story.

The audience couldn't believe it when Elijah continued the story on for me and told them about how I had defeated the elderwood guardian. They refused to believe us until I finally pulled out the beast core. It was then that they were forced to swallow their doubts as they stared in awe at the dull green orb that was smaller than my fist.

"Speaking of core. Dad, what stage are you at?" I asked.

Giving me an embarrassed chuckle, he answered, "I've been stuck at the bottleneck of the dark orange stage since you left. No matter how much I meditate and purify mana, I can't seem to break through."

"Perfect. Use this then." I tossed the core to my father, catching him by surprise. "I had to use a bit while I was healing but there should be enough in this beast core to help you break through."

Handling the small orb like it was made godsent, he shook his head with a frozen expression. "Son, I can't. This is something you fought for with your life. I can't just take this from you."

I was prepared to shove the orb down my father's throat when my mother chimed in. "Honey, I'm sure Arthur isn't giving this to you on a whim. If he wants you to have it, it's for a good reason."

"Listen to your wife, Rey. The boy must have his reasons. You're his father, for God's sake. Get stronger, it'll help me as well!" Vincent laughed.

Tabitha just chuckled at this. "Alice, your son brought quite the present."

"For the amount of worrying he caused me, I'm still weighing whether it was worth it!" my mother joked, exchanging a laugh with her friend.

"You have to catch up to me, Dad. You can't let your son leave you in the dust, right?" I smirked, attracting confused gazes.

My father looked up at me. "Don't tell me..."

"Yup"—I leaned back on the couch—"Light orange stage."

Vincent's eyes practically bulged as his wife let out a sharp breath in awe.

"Sweet mother of—that's just ridiculous," Vincent breathed out, shaking his head.

My family took the news a lot better, indicating that they were used to their monster of a son.

My father held up the elderwood's beast core with a renewed fervor in his eyes. "Don't cry when your old man beats you down the next time we duel, then."

"You're on," I grinned back.

We shifted topics after a few more awestruck comments by Vincent and Tabitha.

The next order of things had to do with Elijah. He had told everyone about his background before I had arrived but left it at that. I explained to my family and the Helstea wife and husband that he was both a close friend and a benefactor who saved both Jasmine's life and mine.

"How would you feel about sponsoring Elijah so he could attend Xyrus Academy with me?" I finally said.

'I'll have to talk it over with Director Cynthia, if I can make that old woman squeeze in some time for me, but I don't see why not!" Vincent answered with a grin. His eyes twinkled underneath his glasses as he studied the anxious Elijah. From the stories he'd heard today, there was no doubt that the inner businessman in him had flared in excitement.

Investing in future generations of mages was a large part of what rich folks did in order to maintain their power and status later on.

Vincent excused himself first, saying that he was going to write a letter to the Director of Xyrus Academy right now. My father went out into the backyard, saying he was going to start training immediately, so it was just my mother, Ellie, Elijah, Tabitha and myself left in the living room.

My mother and Tabitha took turns squeezing out more details from when I was adventuring before my mother insisted I have a checkup from her to make sure I didn't have any lasting wounds.

I told her I was fine and that I'd put the glove she gave me to good use. She didn't seem too happy about the fact that I had actually been in a situation where I had to use it on myself but she was just glad I was still in one piece.

I talked a bit more with my baby sister. She was curious as to why Sylvie changed appearance and why she was sleeping. After explaining that she was tired from the adventure, I realized how drained I was.

"Mom, Aunt Tabitha, I think I'm going to head up with Elijah as well. I'm a bit worn from the journey."

"Of course. Don't forget to wash up before sleeping." My mother smiled at us as Elijah respectfully wished everyone a good night.

"Goodnight, Brother! Goodnight, Elijah!" my sister chimed, carefully handing me my bond.

After we excused ourselves, Elijah and I headed up to my room. "Elijah, you wash up first; I'm going to organize my things."

The maid brought the set of sleepwear I asked for and I absentmindedly walked into the bathroom to give it to Elijah.

"Hey! I'm naked!" Elijah yelped, snapping me out of my thoughts. My friend nearly slipped on the damp floor as he fumbled to cover himself.

"Relax, Princess. I can hardly make out your shape because of the steam," I lied as I left the bathroom.

With his black hair dripping on the floor, Elijah walked out of the bathroom, the set of pajamas I had given him and a small absorbent cloth draped over his shoulders.

"Dang. I didn't realize how great a warm shower is," Elijah sighed, his eyes covered by his fogged-covered glasses. "Your turn."

Elijah was right, the hot water was pure bliss on my bare body. After quickly washing myself, I carefully cleaned Sylvie with the damp washcloth. I wasn't sure if it was because she could sense that I was near her, but she didn't stir at all from her sleep.

Laying side-by-side in the one large bed that occupied one side of the room, Elijah and I began talking.

"Is this line of pillows between us really necessary?" I asked, placing Sylvie on the pillow above my head.

"Shut up. It's weird already that two boys are sleeping on the same bed," Elijah retorted, stacking more pillows between us.

I couldn't help but realize that, in the mind of a twelve-year-old boy, being uncomfortable in this situation wasn't odd.

"Would you have preferred that I was a girl?" I smirked, shifting in my side of the bed to get comfortable.

Elijah's head popped up from the other side of the pillow wall. "Do you think we'll learn a lot at Xyrus Academy?" Elijah asked, ignoring my snide remark.

"Who knows? I imagine it'll be a little boring, no? Both of us are well above the skill level of the first years there."

"But there will be people from all those powerful families. I imagine there will be a few who are on my level, right? I'm really excited to learn how to start controlling my powers. I'm glad that Xyrus has a lot of famous mages to learn from," Elijah gushed, his face lit with excitement.

"Yeah. I think it'll be useful learning more about lightning and ice attribute skills." I look down at my hands. These hands had grown a lot faster than I imagined. Just a few years ago, my hands were that of an infant. Just like my abilities, my body would continue to grow and mature. The thought of that, along with experiencing everything I couldn't in my past life, filled me with excitement.

"Hey," Elijah called out, interrupting my train of thought. "Have you thought of what you're going to do about Lucas?"

"Lucas has no idea who I am," I replied. "And until I'm confident that I can confront his whole family, I'll have it stay that way for the time being. Training comes first."

"Well you know you can count me in. Lucas is probably going to have it out for me when he sees me but he doesn't think too much of me," Elijah replied. "I still can't believe that a*s tried to sacrifice all of us so that he could escape."

"He is an a*s," I agreed. "But we're probably going to meet more people like him along the way, maybe even worse."

Elijah was silent for a moment, hidden behind the stack of pillows between us inside our dark room. Suddenly, his head popped up once more and he stared seriously at me.

"Hey, Arthur. Do you think I'll find a girlfriend at Xyrus?"

Caught off guard, I let out a cough.

“Wow, your train of thought is really all over the place,” I let out before breaking into a fit of laughter. Even with only the dim, pale light of the moon lighting up our bedroom, I could Elijah’s face turn red.

“I’m being serious, you a*s!” he exclaimed, smacking me with one of the many pillows between us.

“For such a serious-looking guy, you sure worry about normal things,” I chuckled. “Don’t worry, I’m sure you’ll meet some black-haired girl with glasses. Then you two will get married and make cute little babies with black hair and glasses and live happily ever after.”

“Do you think babies are born with glasses or something?” Elijah snorted. “Besides, I’m sure you won’t have any trouble getting the ladies with your disgustingly prince-like features.”

“Am I smelling a hint of envy?” I joked.

“You’re smelling just a hint?”

“Meh, don’t worry. The girls our age just look like babies to me,” I comforted. “I won’t take your thunder, my four-eyed friend. Until you find yourself a nice girl, focus on getting better control of your powers.”

“You’re right,” Elijah muttered from the other side of the bed. “Thanks.”

“What was that?” I asked, not making what he whispered.

“Nothing, you a*s. I hope you fall on your face while you sleep!” he snapped.

“Good night to you too,” I grumbled, turning to my side.

My mind, which was once filled with various thoughts on the future, faded into a dull blur as sleep overtook me.

The Beginning After The End – Chapter 38: In the Meantime

The dim ray of the rising sun managed to peek through a gap in the deep burgundy curtains right over my eyelids, waking me up rather pleasantly. Rubbing my crusted eyes, I took a moment to silently take in my surroundings. The Helstea Manor wasn’t built with attackers in mind, so the exposed stone walls were rather thin, instead, allowing for more windows. The room I had been occupying was large but hardly lavish, with only a large dresser to occupy the center of one wall and a desk situated in the corner of another. The only luxury I indulged myself in was the fact that I had my own private washroom, with a heated water supply—something I realized to be truly rare in this world.

Shifting my glance to the unabashed figure of Elijah sprawled out beside me in bed, I shook my head with a smirk. The pillow fort that my friend had insisted on at first had long gone out of trend. Whether it was due to the fact that he had become more comfortable with me, or because building a pillow wall every night seemed to be hassle, I never asked.

Carefully getting out of bed, I gently stroked Sylvie’s head, making her gingerly stretch out like a cat. My bond had ended up sleeping for four days straight before eventually awakening. She explained to me that changing forms like she had a few days before would put a bit of a toll on her body, which was the cause of her deep slumber.

Sylvie stirred awake for a few seconds before letting out a yawn and curling back beside my pillow. I walked over to the dresser, unhooking a thicker robe to wear over my sleepwear to fight against the frigid morning air that I had become unaccustomed to.

It was only a little past dawn so the manor that seemed to always be bustling with maids and my little sister was still very peaceful, with the only noises coming from the few cooks in the kitchen getting ready for the day. Not bothering to wash up, I made my way to the backyard where I felt fluctuations in mana. As expected, my father was busy training, absorbing the S class beast core I had retrieved from the dungeon.

Not wanting to disturb his training, I found a place to sit next to him and I began studying his aura. My father, Reynolds Leywin, ex-party member of the Twin Horns, was stuck at a bottleneck—unable to exceed past the dark orange stage.

Over the past few days I'd been back home, I had spent a lot of time overlooking the mana circulation in my father's body, as well as Elijah's.

As expected, Elijah's mana veins, the veins responsible for absorbing mana from the surrounding atmosphere, were incredibly wide. My father, on the other hand, had much more developed mana channels, the arteries that allowed diverse distribution of mana throughout the body, since he was an augments. However, while its been developed to its limit, it was hardly exceptional.

"Ah! You're up early today, son. Why didn't you say anything?" My father got up, wiping the sweat off of his face and neck with a towel he had on his lap.

"I didn't want to disturb your training, Dad. How are things going?" I got up as well and began stretching.

"It took a few days, but finally finished absorbing the rest of the beast core. For some reason, though, the core didn't crumble." He handed the S class core back to me with a curious look on his face. Usually, after the purified mana stored inside the beast core is depleted, the beast core would crumble into fine dust.

Thinking it peculiar myself, I put it into my pocket to study later.

My father had been doing little else except eating and sleeping for an hour or so during the process of absorbing the beast core. At first, not much difference in levels could be felt, but looking at his aura now, I could see a noticeable change.

Noticing my inquisitive look, he shot me a smirk and tossed me his dirty towel. "Your father has now passed the dark orange stage into the solid orange stage."

I gave my father an exaggerated round of applause as he began flexing his muscles in demonstration of his accomplishments.

"Congrats, Dad. Now that you're at solid orange stage, I think it'll be okay to teach you something I've been messing around with." I tossed the towel onto a nearby chair.

Giving me a curious look, he beckoned for me to continue.

Focusing a tiny bit of mana into the palm of my right hand, I will a small flame to ignite. “Here is the most basic flame attribute technique you learn, Ember.” I shoot the small flame from my palm toward the towel that was hanging off the nearby metal chair.

As expected, the small flame, by the time it reached its target, was so diluted that all it left was a tiny black soot mark in the middle of the white towel.

“If you’re talking about mana theory, it’s not anything new to me, son. For augmenters, since we produce mana from within our bodies, the farther the mana travels away from us, the more diluted and weaker it becomes.”

“I wasn’t trying to demonstrate mana theory. That’ll be for next time, Dad.” I wagged my finger at him, earning myself a hard thump on the head.

Rubbing my head, I willed another small portion of mana into the palm of my hand. I ignited another flame but whereas the first time the color of the flame was bright red, this one was orange. “Now watch, Dad.” I shot the small flame, that was the same size as the previous flame, at the towel once more, but this time, it burned a small hole through the towel.

My father didn’t show much of a reaction. “Didn’t you just add more mana into the flame to make it stronger?”

Shaking my head, I explained. “If I added more mana, the flame would be bigger. Dad, did you notice the color of the flame?”

“Yeah, the color was a bit lighter—more orange.” He scratched his head, trying to piece this puzzle together.

“That’s the key! What I did just now was a technique that is considered a high level spell used by conjurers.” I grew excited as I began explaining it to him.

“You see, fire’s temperature—or more accurately—the rate of combustion, depends on a mix of different things: the amount of oxygen in the atmosphere, thermal radiation, the type of fuel being burned, the oxidation of the fuel and so on. The so-called ‘fuel’ being burned, in this case, is fire attribute mana. What I discovered while playing around with it is how versatile this ‘fuel’ can be. That orange flame, Dad, was a flame much hotter than the previous one, making it even stronger.” I stopped to take a breath.

My father shoots me an expression as if I had just talked to him in Hebrew but he seemed to have understood the last portion of my explanation. “So what you’re saying is that, by using the same amount of mana, I can produce an even hotter flame for my techniques?” He fiddled with his beard while pondering.

“Exactly! Watch, it can go even further.” I demonstrated again, this time producing a yellow flame, which left an even bigger hole in the towel, with the ridges still aflame.

I didn’t stop there. The last demonstration took a bit more time, since I had to manipulate, very carefully, the fire attribute mana in my palm. After a couple of minutes, I produced a dim blue flame, which made my father’s eyes go wide. Upon throwing the blue flame at the towel, the towel instantly combusted and the fire spread rapidly, eating away at the towel until only ashes were left.

“Are you sure you’re my son?” My father gave me a suspicious eye before smiling.

Smiling back, I replied, “I must’ve gotten Mom’s brain, right?”

Just then, Elijah walked in, his hair a bird’s nest and his glasses crooked. He cast a drowsy glance toward us, taking in the sight of me clinched in a headlock by my father who was squeezing hard at my nose as I tapped in resignation.

“What are you guys doing?” he said as he yawned, rubbing his eyes.

“Training.” We replied in unison, my voice coming out nasally through my pinched nose.

I gave my father a few key pointers in controlling the structure of his flame attribute mana so he could produce higher-level flames. Changing the structure of the attribute mana was basically the essence of chanting a spell. Using vocal incantations could condition the brain to change the structure of the mana in the atmosphere to create a spell.

While settling into a meditative position, my father asked, “Son, why did I have to achieve solid orange stage in order to learn this though?”

“The higher your mana core stage, not only do you have a larger pool of mana to draw from, the purified mana inside of you becomes higher quality, so you can have more control over the miniscule properties of it,” I clarified, turning my focus unto Elijah.

Nodding in understanding, my father resumed his training, holding his right palm up and willing mana into it.

Elijah’s training was a bit slower. What I realized with Elijah was that his control over his main element, Earth, was unstable, metal even more. It wasn’t so much as a problem with mana manipulation of earth attribute mana, but more so the quantity. Elijah’s lack of control over the strength of his power made it so he couldn’t make precise and coordinated spells.

One thing that continued to baffle me about Elijah’s magic was how unfair it was. Earth was powerful, yet limited in the sense that conjurers and augmenters alike could only make do with the earth that was accessible to them. Most of the time, that wasn’t a problem, but it still gave a certain amount of predictability in the attacks that earth mages used.

Elijah, on the other hand, seemed to have the ability to change the structure of molecules and change them into earth. The closest thing I could think of that may explain it was something akin to alchemy. Elijah, for example, could summon earth spikes from trees and buildings made of wood. A limitation is that he wasn’t able to conjure earth spells from water or thin air, but his capability to so easily change the structure of earth and its properties was frightening, even to me.

When I thought about the possibilities of how his powers could be used, I thought of the spell, Petrification. When normal earth conjurers used the petrification spell, it was actually just using the surrounding earth to form around the target, “petrifying” him. Elijah, on the other hand, if he became adept enough, could literally change a human into stone.

I shook my head to dismiss my frightening thoughts. At this point, I was just glad that Elijah was a friend, not a foe.

Elijah's training consisted of playing around with a small ball of earth. He had practiced doing different things with the small ball of earth: rotating it really fast, changing the shape of it, expanding it, condensing it, splitting it into different pieces, etc. This way, he could train both his mana control and shorten his incantations by learning the so-called "theory" of how the spells worked.

As my father and friend concentrated on their training, I headed back to my room, leaving the two of them alone. I couldn't help but smile at the sight of my bond sleeping so defenselessly on my pillow. She was most likely still recovering from her transformation, observing the amount of time she still spent sleeping; fortunately, these periods of slumber had been getting shorter.

Sitting on the edge of the bed, I took out the beast core my father had returned to me, probing it with a string of mana. The mana inside had been depleted so I was curious as to why it hadn't dissolved. However, upon probing a bit deeper, a sharp pain in my left arm made me drop the beast core.

"What the hell?" I rubbed the rune on my arm that I had always covered underneath Sylvia's feather. Carefully picking up the beast core again, I probed it once more, even more intrigued than before. Suddenly, inside the vast black space of the beast core that I was studying, the shadowed figure of the elderwood guardian that I almost lost my life to appeared, bowing at me with its lance pointed directly upward.

"A beast will!" I trembled in excitement as I clutched harder at the invaluable prize I had obtained from the dungeon. What would happen if I were to integrate with two beasts? Was that possible? Would I then have two? Or would this one replace my Dragon's Will?

While I was thinking of these things, a sudden feeling interrupted me. It wasn't as intimate as the mental transmissions I had with Sylvie, but a primitive form of communication. Realizing that it was from the will of the elderwood guardian, I injected more mana into the beast core, hoping it would somehow allow me to have a better connection with it.

"I see," I muttered aloud. A feeling of disappointment washed over me as I let go of the beast core. From what the elderwood guardian was trying to express, if I were to try and absorb this beast's will, only the stronger of the two would end up being left. It made sense, but what I didn't understand was, why wasn't my father able to absorb the beast's will?

I realized the answer almost immediately after remembering what Grandpa Virion, that crazy old elf, taught me a few years back. There was the matter of compatibility between the beast's element and the mage's element attribute.

I couldn't help but let out a small smile knowing who to give this to.

'Good morning, Papa! Why are you smiling?' Sylvie cuddled up on my lap and let out a purr as I stroked her fur-like scales.

"I'm just thinking of how fun school is going to be," I answered.

"Brother! Wake ...oh!" My sister slammed the door open but after seeing me awake, she just stood by the door.

Walking up, I patted my sister's small head with a smile. "Let's go eat!"

The Beginning After The End – Chapter 39: Introspection

“Whew.” Wiping the sweat off my body with a towel I then hung nearby, I put my robe back on. I stood on the backyard patio with only the full moon illuminating the area. Sylvie was curled up beside me, her now white fur heaving up and down, matching the pace of her breathing.

With everyone else asleep, I had the peace of training to my heart’s content. These past few weeks, I’d been doing little outside of training myself as well as helping the growth of Elijah and my father, with a few pointers for my baby sister as well.

Ellie hasn’t been training much but her progress was still pretty decent. I predicted that she’d awaken around eleven if she kept at her pace, maybe even ten if she actually started trying more. I found it oddly satisfying when I watched my sister play with the friends she had made at the School for Ladies, a small class of noble young girls gathered together to be taught etiquette and basic household skills. Early on, I learned that this general population believed that “proper” and “refined” ladies should have both the manners and grace of a queen, while still being able to c**k and sew for her husband.

In the world I lived before, women worked just as much as men, and the whole “women should stay at home” saying became taboo, often incurring the wrath of many females and other males alike if said aloud.

However, the things Ellie learned in school seemed to only be reserved for the public, because though Ellie was asleep now, she’d made a fuss beforehand, saying she wouldn’t go to bed if I didn’t stay with her until she fell asleep.

I couldn’t help but chuckle when I compared that spoiled behavior to the refined, graceful façade she’d put on in front of her friends, acting all lady-like and whatnot. I’d almost burst out laughing when she addressed me as “dear honorable brother” in front of the couple of girls her age at her tea party.

My sister’s birthday was coming up soon and I could tell she was eagerly wondering what present I would give her. Knowing her, she would probably love whatever I gave her as long as I gave it some thought, but with my personality, I wanted to give her something functional as well. The problem was, I was out of money. This blasted dimension ring costed me all the gold I earned as an adventurer.

I thought a little bit about what I could do to earn money when something came to mind. One obvious advantage I had was the fact that my mind contained ideas and inventions that hadn’t been developed in this world yet.

With a satisfied grin on my face, I turned back to training. There were two things I was focusing on outside of developing my mana core, which I estimated would reach dark yellow stage by the time school started in autumn. One was training heavily on my lightning and ice attribute skills, which were by far my strongest assets.

I decided I’d keep my fire, water, lightning and ice skills a secret during my stay at Xyrus Academy. Being an adept dual-elemental augmenter was the most attention I would want during my years there, and since Lucas had only seen me use fire elemental skills during the dungeon excursion and at the testing grounds, it’d be even harder for him to fit the pieces together if I only used earth and wind magic. If I purposely didn’t train my earth and wind magic at all until I entered the academy, it’d be more than enough to pass off myself as a mere ‘talented genius’ that wouldn’t raise too many eyebrows.

I opened one of the books I brought with me from the library. I managed to find some of the limited books on deviation skills, containing a few segments on lightning and ice. It seemed that, for lightning, there were two main methods that augmenters opted to. One was internal, and the other was external. Because of the unique properties of lightning compared to other elements and their deviants, there were some individuals who focused on using internal lightning skills, which was stated as much more difficult.

Thunderclap Impulse was one of the internal lightning techniques that I had developed, which could be seen as the stepping stone into much more powerful skills. The book only went on to say that, for internal lightning users, most reached a ceiling quite early on before ultimately switching to external techniques. This meant that internal lightning skills hadn't been developed enough for people to actually find advantages in it.

This was also the route that I chose to go. While I would have some external lightning skills under my belt, I knew from experience just how much more powerful internal skills were compared to the external counterparts. Of course, it may not be as flashy but what I wanted wasn't a dazzling light show—I wanted absolute power. It'd take time and patience to develop but I already knew the rewards would be tremendous as I imagined the levels above just using a small current of lightning to quicken my reaction.

As for my ice elemental skills, I wanted to focus on a wide range skills to fight against multiple opponents. The combination skill of White Fire and Absolute Zero was my strongest skill, which I could only use under the massive power-up I got from the second phase of my Dragon's Will, Integrate. I imagined that, for now, even if I had the technique and theory down for either lightning or ice, I'd need to be in the Integrate phase if I wanted to use the more powerful skills.

I couldn't help but grow a little impatient at this fact but there wasn't much I could do now except train. I had so many advantages but I was still dissatisfied with the level of power I had. I could say with confidence that, if I were to fight against the former me from my old world, I would win. The amount of mana in this world and the fact that I had Dragon's Will alongside mana rotation, I could easily overpower my previous self. However, the world I was in was filled with dangers much greater than the dangers in my old world, so growing complacent would end up being detrimental.

I picked up the other book that I brought, which was on beast wills. I'd already read it once so I skipped to the part on training it, which made me sigh in helplessness. I saw this coming, but I couldn't help but grow disheartened when I read it the first time. It seemed that the best way to train the beast will acquired was being taught by the beast itself. The only other alternative mentioned was to study thoroughly about the beast itself so the beast tamer could learn and practice the traits of the beast.

Option one was obviously out of the question, seeing as Sylvia either died or become hostage to whatever being that black-horned figure was. Option two had its limit as well. The fact that I could even use one of the 'acquire' skills and even go into Integrate phase was because of the perks in being a Legacy Tamer, where a certain amount of insight came alongside the Will. Even for a dragon, she

seemed so unique; I couldn't even imagine what sort of powers she had. I wished she had left me some clues as to what some of her powers were before everything happened.

"Snap out of it!" I said aloud while smacking both of my cheeks. Bringing myself down on what I didn't have wasn't going to solve anything.

Besides training my lightning and ice attribute magic, the other skill I wanted to learn was magic cancellation.

The theory was that elemental attribute mana was manipulated, whether through the form of a spell or through extensive knowledge of the skill, into the projected destination or into the caster's own body. Speaking very technically, these mana particles were basically coded to affect either the atmosphere or the specific target to produce a certain outcome. There was a very small delay from when the mage casted the coded mana particles and when those particles had an effect and formed the spell.

During that delay, if I was able to potentially disrupt those mana particles with mana of my own, I would be able to discreetly terminate the spell without it even forming.

While in theory that sounded amazing, there were several problems. One, in order for this to even work, I would have to know what spell the opponent was using. That wasn't a problem when the conjurer or even the augments chanted the spell, but in cases of mental chanting, or even instacasting, I would have to know what the spell was by the makeup of the mana during the near split-second the manipulated mana particles were cast before it took effect and formed a spell.

This required learning a tremendous amount of spells and figuring out which skills could effectively cancel them out. Just thinking about that left me with a headache. Most spells could be figured out with magic theory but being able to almost instantly think of the correct spell to counteract the opponent's meant I needed to know it by heart. However, I knew that mastering this skill would be a priceless asset, especially for someone like me, who was able to manipulate all four elements.

I picked up my books and towel with one hand and picked up Sylvie with the other and headed back up to my room. Vincent offered another room for Elijah but my parents wouldn't allow it since he was a Leywin guest, which meant he should just stay in one of our rooms. As a compromise, I asked them to just bring in another bed for Elijah, since the room was more than spacious enough.

Returning back to my room, Elijah was already fast asleep, straight on his back with his arms folded on his chest, as if he was lying in a coffin.

Even when he slept, he looked like such a straight and proper fellow. Elijah was a good friend and it helped that our personalities complimented each other. Elijah was pretty peculiar. Despite his straight-laced, stern appearance—mainly due to the hair and glasses—he was a very emotional lad. He was logical in a way where he had set principles that he never strayed from, making him very honest and trustworthy, but when it came to people and relationships, he often thought with his 'heart,' leaving him quite vulnerable if people chose to take advantage of him.

As for me, whether it was because I lived and remember my previous life, I could only see myself as analytical and somewhat scheming. I had to admit that I had a hard time trusting people completely and always tried to think a couple steps ahead. I somewhat regretted the lack of innocence I had compared to normal eleven-year-olds, but one thing I had grown to realize was that, when it came to the few close

relationships I did have, I would become very invested in them, almost to a fault. Did it have something to do with being an orphan in my previous life? Because the only close person I had was the caretaker that picked me up and was later killed?

Even as a King, I couldn't say with confidence that I had been the most mature, and in many aspects. I would even say I wasn't very King-like, but one thing that I couldn't change was the amount of importance I had to those I held dearly.

After taking a quick shower, I sunk into bed, causing Sylvie to stir in her sleep. She cuddled by me and started breathing steadily again, and the slow rhythm of her breaths lulled me to sleep.

The Beginning After The End – Chapter 40: New Winds

“Brother wake up!!!!”

“Oof!” I groaned, the wind forcefully expelled out of my lungs as my sister jumped on top of me.

Rubbing my sore sternum, I gasped out, “Ellie, you're not a little kid anymore. You're going to seriously hurt me one day.”

“Are you calling me fat, Brother?” Ellie feigned a gasp.

“Extremely,” I added, tossing her off of me. My little sister let out surprised squeal as I tickled her.

This little rascal, only learning useless things at that school for proper ladies or whatnot.

After a tear-filled surrender by my sister, I turned to see Elijah already showered and clothed, his glasses still clouded from the steam. “I swear, you sleep like a log, Art. Your wife is going to seriously have to use spells to wake you up when you get older.”

“Shaddup,” I slurred, too tired to make a witty comeback.

After quickly washing my face and fixing my hair to a barely-presentable degree, the four of us, with Sylvie on top of my head, headed downstairs.

‘I wonder what's for breakfast. I hope it's meeeaaat,’ Sylv pondered excitedly, her little fox head swaying side to side in anticipation.

“Good morning, you four! You guys are just in time,” my mother called out to us from the kitchen as the maids were preparing the table. Even though there were cooks in the manor, my mother found it imperative to at least prepare breakfast for us. So, as Tabitha helped her with the meal, the maids set the table and cleaned up afterwards.

After I came back, my family, as well as Vincent and Tabitha, both noticed the apparent change in appearance of Sylvie. I tried playing it off as her naturally transforming after digesting a lot of beast cores, but I had the sense that my parents and the Helsteas knew Sylvie wasn't just your average mana beast; hell, I'd sometimes catch them talking to her like she was a human.

“Good morning, boys—and good morning, my little princess. Did you guys sleep well?” My father, who was talking to Vincent, turned to us, giving my struggling sister a bearded kiss on her cheek.

“Ew, Dad! That tickles!” She pushed him away, wiping the spot she was kissed.

“Did you guys sleep well?” Vincent asked, half-smirking as he watched my father dote on Ellie.

“Good morning Aunt Leywin, Aunt Tabitha, Uncle Vincent and Uncle Reynolds,” Elijah announced before he sat down next to me. He’d stopped calling my parents “Lord” and “Lady” as he got closer to them, eventually calling everyone either “Aunt” or “Uncle.”

After saying good morning to everyone, I got back to my seat and started eating a ham and vegetable omelet with a very light soup.

While eating, my father suddenly spoke up with a mouth full of eggs. “That reminds me. Kids, if you don’t have any plans, do you want to go with us to City Square? There’s a big announcement in the Capital City of Etistin where the King and Queen reside but a couple of artificers are going to put up a live projection of the broadcast in City Square.”

“Honey, please don’t talk with your mouth full,” my mother gently scolded before getting back to her conversation with Tabitha regarding the latest rumors on some mutual acquaintances. It seemed like she was getting along quite well with the noble ladies of Xyrus, seeing as the both of them often go out to brunch meetings and afternoon shopping trips.

“Sounds good. Elijah and I don’t have anything planned today anyways, right?” I turned to my friend who was wolfing down his second omelet. He shot me a thumbs up—his cheeks filled with food.

“I wanna go too! Can I, Mom?” Ellie leaned forward on the table towards my mother.

“You have school today, Ellie. You can hang out with your brother after,” she answered, nudging my pouting sister back down into her chair.

“Uncle Vincent. I remember you mentioned something about how you were going to visit a famous researcher that has a lab in Xyrus. Do you mind introducing me to him after we watch the announcement today?” I said in between bites of food.

“Ah, you mean Gideon? Has he caught your interest? He’s not just a researcher but a well-known inventor and artificer as well! He’s the one responsible for designing the ships we use for rivers as well as a few other well-used artifacts! I do have some business with him anyway so it wouldn’t be a problem taking you. Was there something specific you needed from him?” he quizzed, the intelligent eyes behind his glasses shining with curiosity.

“Not something I need, but more of something to discuss. I thought he would find it valuable.” My vague answer caught his interest all the more.

“Well, he’s not the type to meet new people but I’m sure I can get him to pop his head out of his hole if I’m with you,” he nodded to himself.

“Great! Looking forward to it.” I focused back on my empty plate. Looking down, I caught Sylvie scarfing down the last of my omelette.

The City Square, which was usually bustling with a lot of activity, was abnormally packed with both normal civilians and nobles alike. On the side of the large clock tower, there were four orbs creating a square while underneath these floating orbs, there were two artificers with their brown robes. The less-

than-attractive clothing signified that they didn't do their work for glory and fame, but it didn't keep the mages from chanting with unnecessarily grand gestures, hands waving as if they were conducting a symphony.

Sylvie was fidgeting on top of my head, taking in all the sights and the huge crowd of people gathered. It was only Elijah, my father and Vincent that came with me, as the women in the house had other plans.

As more and more people gathered, a crackled image began forming with the four glowing orbs as its corners. Suddenly, the fuzzy image became clearer, the mirage of colors forming into the image of the Glayder Castle.

"The three Kings and Queens of the different countries in our beloved Continent of Dicathen have gathered here on this memorable day!"

I see a very fancily-dressed man with a thick grey beard announce to an audience that looked to be in the hundreds of thousands, judging by the space the people took up.

"Attention Humans, Elves, and Dwarves alike, I go by Blaine Glayder. While most of you know me as the King of Sapin, today I speak not as the King of Humans, but as one of the representative of the Continent of Dicathen!"

The hundreds of thousands of people all kneeled, some going on all fours in worship at the sight of the King. The blurry projection becomes clearer and zoomed in closer to the balcony of the Castle. There, I could see the King of Sapin in the front with the Queen of Sapin, Priscilla Glayder, seated behind him alongside a few other important-looking figures. My eyes widened as I spotted Alduin and Merial Eralith, the King and Queen of Elenoir, with Grandpa Virion standing behind them with his arms crossed and his white hair tied neatly behind his pointed ears. Beside them are two representatives of the Dwarves, both lavished in extravagant clothing much too large for their compact figures; I assumed that they were the king and queen.

"Today marks the beginning of a new era in this Continent we call our home. I assume many of you are aware of the existing problems between the Humans and the Elves while even the Dwarves were considered just business partners. However, that is not the way we wish to continue. The representatives of all three kingdoms—your leaders—have met together many times over these past few years in an effort to unite our races. Two years ago, we had agreed for all three races to be able to become adventurers. It started out with just one or two representatives, but now it has expanded. It brings me a smile when I see parties with humans, elves, and dwarves alike, working together towards a common goal. Last year marked another big milestone where Xyrus Academy welcomed students from the Kingdom of Elenoir and the Kingdom of Darv so that the new generation of mages can make friends and memories with not just humans, but all three races. We all understand how difficult it may be for some of us to adjust after constant enmity between us. However, we urge you to let go of the past and the discriminations you may hold, and think beyond that, if not for yourself, but for your children and the future of this continent."

There was another big round of applause with a roar of worship and adoration accompanying it. King Glayder sat down and Alduin Eralith, the King of Elenoir and Tessia's father, got up from his seat and cleared his throat before speaking into this world's version of what seemed to be a microphone.

“It is an honor to speak on behalf of everyone here on this unforgettable day. As King Glayder so adamantly stated, I am also in agreement about the future of our continent. For some people, this may not hold much interest but for many who yearn for adventure and new places to visit, I can wholeheartedly say that this continent is filled with many unknowns. An obvious example is the very Beast Glades residing just beyond our borders. While an uncountable number of adventurers have ventured out into the Beast Glades, it is not an exaggeration to say that not even half of it has been traversed. While the mana beasts have not left the Beast Glades, who is to say that just because they haven’t yet, they never will? Even in our own homeland of Dicathen, there are places so dangerous, no one dares to explore, but what if I were to say that even greater mysteries and dangers are out there?”

King Eralith paused for a brief moment while the crowd in Etistin and the crowd here in the City Square of Xyrus filled with the sound of murmurs.

“That’s right! You have not heard wrong, fellow citizens of Dicathen. We are announcing today, February 10th of the 1005th Cycle, that we have found evidence of another continent.”

The crowds erupted into a clamor of noises, some angry, some afraid, but everyone curious. Even my own hands shook in excitement as my father and Vincent looked at each other in shock.

“Please. We ourselves don’t know very much, so your guess is as good as ours. What we do know is that, out there—possibly within reach in a few years’ time—is another continent that may or may not be hostile. There have been evidence of them trying to reach us as well, but on both sides, it seems that our current technology does not permit us to travel that far.”

The crowd shown in the Capital was in chaos until the dwarven king rose from his chair and trotted towards the microphone.

“QUIETTTTT!!!”

The dwarven king roared into the voice-enhancing artifact.

“As Alduin said, we don’t know much. However, in these times of uncertainty and possible threats in the future, wouldn’t you guys all agree that standing beside one another is what’s best for this continent and our people? Your children can be in danger as well. The last thing we want is to fight amongst ourselves. Our appearances may be different and our cultures may clash, but remember this...we are all born in this continent of Dicathen. I for one am proud of that and hope that future generations will feel the same way. What about you?”

The crowd remained silent at first but a couple of claps triggered a huge boom of applause as cheers and whistles broke out. The Dwarf King wasn’t as eloquent in his words as the two previous kings that spoke, but his words had a very strong impact. Even Elijah next to me was clapping excitedly as Sylvie continued to watch the screen in curiosity.

“The process of joining our three races and kingdoms will take time and much effort, but today, we will be anointing six individuals—individuals that we, the three kings and queens, believe to be the most courageous, tactful, smart and powerful.”

From the back of the podium, six warriors came out: two elves, two humans and two dwarves. Clad in refined white armor that varied slightly for each person, they walked up and knelt down on one knee.

The three kings each made their way in front of the six kneeling knights and took out from a small ornamental box, six rings. King Glayder of the humans presented the rings to the two elf knights while the Dwarf King presented it to the two human knights. Finally, King Alduin of the Elves placed the rings on the two Dwarf knights, stating that they stand and bow to the crowd. As the cheers exploded, King Glayder went up and spoke once more.

“These six individuals will henceforth be granted the title of the Six Lances. Each Lance signifies the ties they hold not to their Kingdom, but to the entire Continent. This is a truly historical moment as the first Lances have been anointed. These six individuals’ main goal will be towards the well-being of the Continent, whether that be exploring dangerous and unknown dungeons in the Beast Glades, as well as working alongside us, the rulers of this Continent, to ensure that our home is protected when the time comes that we are met with foreign hostilities from a different Continent.”

Once more, the crowd roared as many began throwing flowers and the hats that they were wearing up in the air. As the crowd in Xyrus began clamoring in excitement, I couldn’t help but think to myself. I knew that such theories as herd mentality or crowd psychology hadn’t been defined in this world, but the leaders of our country knew exactly how to exploit the emotions of the mass.

“Lastly, while the title of being one of the Six Lances may be prestigious and comparable to even ourselves as kings and queens, this title also brings upon a great burden and danger. Children of the new generation that seek to become the future protectors of this Continent, strive to be one of the Six Lances! Grow strong and noble as not even the heavens are the limit!”

With that, the four orbs making up the corners of the projection floated down as the image of the announcement faded. The last thing we heard were the chants of, “Long live the King, long live Dicathen!”

Beside me, I heard Elijah muttering to himself, “Wow... the Six Lances... That sounds awesome.” The children within the crowd already started play-acting the scene of the anointment, shouting with their friends that they too have become one of the Six Lances and are going to go out and fight evil.

A part of me wanted to be excited as well. Hell, I was excited! The prospect of a new continent to explore with different people and maybe even different races intrigued me to no end. However, I was quite cynical of this whole thing. Sure, the points they made were quite valid, but in the end, they were just baselessly making this new continent the common enemy so that all of the races of Dicathen could unite. It was an old tool used by many kings, but an effective one that worked.

Still... my heart as, not just a king, but a warrior and mage thirsting for adventure and excitement, thumped harder and harder.

“Not even the heavens are the limit,” I repeated under my breath.