

The Beginning After The End – Chapter 61: Romantic Idiot

“Art, can we talk?” As she resolved herself, the slight trembling in her voice disappeared.

“Sure. It seems that there’s a third party at work here trying to make us talk anyways.” I sat back, leaning on my arms, my face dripping with the fresh water.

“About the k-kiss—are you mad?” Tess’s face was bright red, revealing how nervous she felt compared to her terse expression.

“I’m not mad. I was surprised, but I’m not mad.” I would’ve been lying if I said I hadn’t noticed Tess showing feelings for me since all the way back when I lived with her in Elenoir.

There was brief silence where I could tell Tess was waiting for me to say something, except I didn’t know what to say at this moment.

If it was as simple as choosing between liking or disliking Tess, of course it leaned heavily toward the former, but this situation wasn’t as black and white as that. While I knew it wasn’t unnatural for children, especially of royalty, to get married at the age of thirteen or fourteen, there was another factor that came into play here: I could only see this girl in front of me as a child.

I held back the urge to let out a deep breath.

I began to question the use of being so experienced in fighting and politics when I didn’t even know where to start when it came to something as basic as love—or whatever this was.

“Arthur, what are you thinking about?” She leaned closer as her brows furrowed more deeply. The intensity in which she was staring at me made me uncomfortable but this issue wasn’t something I could keep pushing aside.

“Tess, we’ve known each other since we were four. The first time I saw you, you were getting kidnapped after you had a fight with your parents. The first thing you did when I saved you was cry your heart out. After we made our way back to your kingdom, I was fortunate enough to be able to stay in your castle, where your grandpa and eventually even your parents warmed up to me. Even now, your family and mine get along to the point of it being weird...” I took a deep breath before I tried to continue.

“I don’t understand what you’re trying to say.” Tess had an impatient look on her face.

“Tess, we’re still so young. I mean, I’m only twelve and you’ve barely turned thirteen as well! I know that it’s not weird for a girl your age to get married since you’re royalty, but I mean, I don’t have that background.” I realized I was stuttering a bit.

“Art. I know you well enough and right now, you’re just making excuses. You and I both know that what I meant wasn’t to get married right away. I-I just want things to progress. Even back in Elenoir, you just treated me like I was a kid! It’s been almost eight years since then, Art... I have a lot to learn but I don’t consider myself such a child anymore.” Her stern gaze turned soft as she desperately tried to reason with me.

“It’s because I’ve known you since we were both children that it’s harder for me to see you as anything more, at least right now, Tess. It hasn’t even been that long since we met after such long time as well.” I could feel my argument coming out more and more as petty excuses but I stood my ground.

Tess’s bangs covered her face as her head turned to the ground. She suddenly sprung to her feet, her face red and tense, as if on the verge of tears.

“So, you’re telling me that all this time, you haven’t once thought of me as anything more than a childhood friend?” she asked through pursed lips.

I averted my gaze, unable to keep staring at her.

I didn’t know how to respond. Of course there were times when I had to ask myself if I was supposed to reciprocate the feelings Tess had of me back then, but my conscience firmly stopped me. While I had spent twelve years in this body, acting—for the most part—my age, I still had memories of the near-forty years I had spent in my previous life. With memories of the children at the orphanage I had grown up in calling me ‘Uncle’ whenever I visited, I couldn’t help but picture Tess as one of those kids.

“I see,” she whispered, taking my silence as the answer. Tess whipped around and stomped off towards the door of the training facility.

As she opened the door, she said without turning around, “You know, Arthur. You’re so confident in so many things. Magic, fighting, using your brain. You’re so confident in everything you do because you’re good at them. But, you know what? There are things you’re not good at. You’re not good at confronting your feelings. You always put on a mask and pretend you’re happy or apathetic when you can’t handle a certain situation. I think in that sense, you’re a lot less mature than even the so-called ‘children’ you see in this academy. You’re just using your confidence in your strengths to mask the insecurities you have in things you know you’re not good at!”

As the door closed behind her, I was left with an eerie silence that not even the sound of the waterfall could cover.

‘Papa’s a d\*\*\*y...’ Sylvie curled up a couple of meters away, turning away from me.

I sat in front of the pond, stunned by her last words. I had to admit that in some ways, maybe Tess was more mature than I was. Even in my past life, aside from being a great fighter, I wasn’t that impressive of a man. I had the charisma and character to appeal to the masses but when it came to interpersonal relationships, I considered myself mediocre on a good day. I grew up avoiding long lasting relationships, seeing them as nothing more than a burden that would eventually be used against me. In order to be the best, I had to have no weaknesses, and having a lover would’ve eventually led to my demise.

I’d come to realize this even more since coming into this world. Having family that I would happily die for reminded me of how truly weak I was. If someone were to kidnap any one of my family members, no matter how strong I personally was, I would be at their beck and call.

The thought of having a lover, someone I could call my other half, was a wonderful thing, but it was also something that truly scared me.

After clipping back the bracelet that sealed my fire and water elemental attributes, I made my way back to the surface and headed towards my next class. How was I supposed to face Tess in my Team Fighting Mechanics class? Even Sylvie was pouting on top of my head because I'd made Tess angry.

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"Good to have you back, Art." Claire ran to me, giving me a firm slap on the back.

"Are you feeling a bit better?" Curtis also caught up to us, Grawder following behind him.

"I'll probably have to sit out for a few more classes, but I'm okay," I replied, giving him a weak smile as we arrived at the field.

"Good to see you walking, Mr. Leywin!" Professor Glory beamed as she spotted the three of us arrive but when she was about to walk over to us, a rather malicious intent radiated from beside her.

Lucas had a harsh look on his face as he took big, confident strides towards us.

I matched my gaze to his, neither of us looking away as he approached me. Gripping my shirt up by the collar, he pulled me close to his face.

"I think we need a rematch." His effeminate face was a sight to behold as he scowled, my nose only a few inches away from his.

Gripping his wrist, I replied, my face stone cold and eyes deadlocked to his. "This is a pretty rude way to ask for something." I gripped hard enough to make his hand lose strength, but I didn't stop there. I surged a blast of mana at the boy, making his knees give out.

Grimacing in pain, Lucas mumbled inaudibly and soon had orange flames conjured in his free palm, ready to fire at me.

"That's enough!" Professor Glory roared as she shoved her sheathed sword between us.

"Arthur, go rest in the viewing platform. You're not to take part in any activities in this class until you're fully healed—Director Goodsky's orders. As for you, Lucas, you need to calm down. Whether you want to settle your petty grudge with a fight or with a hug, do it after Arthur is fully healed. Now is not the time." She let out a sigh as she nudged me towards the viewing platform. After walking for half a day, I didn't need my sword to lean on but I couldn't walk at a normal pace either.

Heading back, my eyes unconsciously searched for Tess but she was nowhere to be found. "Professor Glory, where's Princess Tessia?"

"She stopped by not too long before you came saying she wasn't feeling well. She said she would make up class somehow but she seemed off so Clive took her back to her dorm. Why? Do you know anything?" Professor Glory asked.

I lied, shaking my head.

"You can get up to the viewing platform without starting another fight, right? Just rest up for a couple more days." She placed a gentle hand on my shoulder before running back off towards the rest of the class.

I watched the class split up into different teams and get in various formations for different circumstances. In scenarios like sieging, conjurers played a crucial role so augmenters got into a much more defensive position, focusing solely on protecting the long-range caster. In scenarios where guerilla fights were necessary, only one or two augmenters remained close to the conjurer as the rest went off on their own.

The class was only a week in so it was very basic but it was obvious that Professor Glory knew what she was doing. The class grasped the lessons well while even having fun. It was a nice sight to see but my mind strayed off to earlier today. I didn't regret the things I said, but I had to question whether I had actually said it well.

My next class was the class I was actually looking forward to the most: Deviant Magic Theory. Unfortunately, our professor, Professor Drywell, placed utmost importance on covering the basics first, so even after a week had passed, she was barely covering the foundation of Deviant Magic.

"Whenever deviant magic is involved, there is a much bigger stress on the price of your magic. Why do you think that is? It's because deviant magic, like its name, is deviant from the natural elemental mana pool that is evident in our world. The mana that surrounds us is made up of only fire, wind, earth and water mana. Deviant magic that comes from the higher form of these four elements have a much greater cost, as I would like to say, compared to the four original elements because there is no such thing as lightning, plant, gravity, metal, magma, sound, or ice mana surrounding us in the atmosphere. In order to produce these phenomena in our spells, the mage must be able to directly alter their parent element and manipulate it into its deviant form." Professor Drywell chattered on. She was a very aged lady and although she had the image of a nice quiet grandmother, she never stopped talking.

"Professor! But gravity, lightning, metal, magma, sound, and ice all exist naturally in our world as well. Why doesn't our world produce these types of mana then?" an older girl asked.

"Good question, young one! Honestly, no one knows for sure why that is! Many mana theorists believe that because a certain set of conditions must be met for those deviant elements to occur, mana directly correlated to them does not exist. Then there are always exceptions such as fire, where it certainly does not just spontaneously manifest without cause. Perhaps that is why most mages believe fire to be the highest form of normal magic, because it is so close to being deviant magic itself," Professor Drywell explained as she paced around the lecture hall.

"Deviant magic that strays even further from the four main elemental mana in our world comes at even a greater cost. All of you know what emitters are. They are healers, essentially. The mana that they utilize does not fall under the category of water, earth, fire, or wind. Instead, I would dare say that there exists a holy element, or light element, to be more accurate. Emitters gain little benefit from absorbing mana from the atmosphere because there is no light elemental mana within our world. Instead, they work to condense and purify the mana that forms in their mana core so that even when less mana is used, there is still a substantial effect in their spells." I could tell Professor Drywell was running out of steam because her voice was getting breathier.

After she finished the day's lesson, we had a short Q&A session but no one really had any questions to ask out of fear that class would never finish. Eventually, Professor Drywell released us and I trudged on to my last class, Spell Formations I.

Most of the students in this class were conjurers but some of the smarter augmenters knew that they could gain benefits to their skills by taking this class. Our teacher, Professor Mayner, was a scholarly-looking man with a monocle and his hair parted down the middle. His mustache was well-trimmed and over his suit, he wore a white gown.

“Welcome, students. I was notified by Director Goodsky that a student named Arthur Leywin will begin joining us for class, am I correct?” He looked around, his monocle catching the glare from the light in the classroom.

“Yes, I’m Arthur Leywin, please guide me well.” I gave a small bow as he nodded in approval.

“Very well! You did not miss anything too important, Mr. Leywin. We were going over the different types of spell formations, from individual spell incantations to group spell formations. Care to tell us what you know about spell formations?” He adjusted his monocle as he approached me, his back straight.

“To my knowledge, spell formations are the conjoining and/or altering of basic spells and skills in order to produce a different phenomenon, whether that be to the user himself, or the specific point in space the spell was invoked,” I answered.

“A most solid answer indeed, Mr. Leywin. Very good.” He clapped his hands once before he went back to the front of the class where he began the lesson.

“I would first like you all to imagine a scenario. Imagine a world where everyone could read everyone’s mind. The fleeting thoughts that can make even the purest man seem perverse or the nicest woman seem cruel are all laid out in the open for others to read. I believe that that world would house the best mages ever known.” The class waited, confused, for the professor to make his point but he moved on.

“I’ll come back to this later, but for now: why do conjurers and even augmenters chant spells? It is not the words that invoke the spell or technique. Instead, the words influence the caster’s consciousness, filling his mind with the correct ‘suggestion’, if you will, that molds the mana into the desired spell.” The sound of everyone furiously scribbling in their notebooks filled the room.

Professor Mayner was a great speaker and he kept the class engaged with the material he was teaching.

“To give a rather humorous example; if I were to say to a girl that liked me, ‘I have always loved you,’ you can bet that there will be some sort of reaction from the girl I say this to. The ‘incantation,’ which was ‘I have always loved you,’ triggers the response, or the ‘spell,’ from her, whether that is blushing, crying, a smile, etc.” The class roared with laughter at the metaphor, but I couldn’t help but wince.

“All in all, if the caster can control his consciousness to mold the mana into his desired spell, then incantations can be greatly shortened or they might not even need them at all. The reason augmenters don’t need to focus so much on chanting is because the spells they use almost always directly involves them using their own body. Conjurers, on the other hand, have to cast much more precise and complicated spells, which require these incantations so that their spells don’t become totally different with a switch of a thought. That is why I said that if there was a world where everyone could read each other’s minds, that world would also have the greatest of magicians. Why? Because they would have absolute control over their thoughts.”

The class went on and while the professor was a great lecturer, I wasn't able to focus as my mind kept shifting back to Tess and her piercing words as she left.

Hiding my insecurities with my confidence...

Was that what I was doing? Was I using the fact that I was a lot better at magic than everyone else as an excuse to avoid confronting what I was actually bad at?

Perhaps I was being a hypocrite. I was going on about how I couldn't see Tess as anything more than a child but I was actually the one that needed to grow up, at least in a certain sense. Getting stronger in my strengths didn't exactly fill in my weak points, it just made them that much more apparent in comparison.

Tess was young. She was also innocent, but that didn't mean she was ignorant. Maybe I was the ignorant one.

"Class is over! Have a great night, students. I shall see you all tomorrow!"

Even as I was walking back to my dorm, my mind was all over the place, almost tripping over myself various times.

D\*\*n it.

I changed directions to where the student council dorms were. Running as fast as my body would let me, I arrived at the building that was much fancier than my dorm hall.

I'm here. How do I meet Tess? It's not like I can just shout out and call for her...

'Papa, Mama is over there.' Sylvie pointed east with her paw and without questioning, I ran in that direction.

"I'm telling you, I'm okay! Please, just let this go, Clive." I heard Tess's voice in the courtyard near the fountain.

"No! How dare that brat make you cry. I knew he would only cause trouble! His poor upbringing is definitely the cause. I can't imagine why Director Goodsky even allowed that peasant in this prestigious academy, and as a disciplinary committee member, no less!" I could vaguely make out Clive's thin frame as he held Tess by her wrist.

Clive noticed me approaching and his face contorted into a scowl. "What the hell do you think you're doing here? You dare try and meet Princess Tessia after you've made her this unwell? If it were up to me, I'd kill you right now!"

Ignoring the thin, stern-looking vice president, I looked at Tess, who turned away. "Tess, can I have some of your time?"

"You're ignoring me?!" Clive roared as he grabbed my shoulder.

As if a fly was constantly buzzing around my ear, I lost my patience. "P\*\*s off," I growled, bombarding him with mana the same way I had done with Lucas.

Releasing a bit too much, Clive was pushed back, stopping only after tumbling into a nearby tree.

“Y-You! Wh-What...” Too flustered, Clive was unable to produce anything more coherent as my gaze never left him.

“Stop. It’s not worth causing a scene over.” Tess got in between Clive and I and took my hand, leading me out of the courtyard.

As I tried to keep up with her quick steps, I nearly tripped, my injured body still unable to do anything more than walk.

“H-Hold on Tess, we’re going too fast. I’m still hurt.” I managed to say in between breaths.

“Oh, I’m so sorry.” Tess glanced back, her stern expression softening for just a second before hardening again.

We were in an alley between the director’s office and the student council’s dorm when we stopped. After Tess let go of my hand, she took a step back and waited for me to catch my breath.

“Well? What do you want?” Tess asked, her gaze fierce.

“...”

“Tess. There were a lot of truths in what you said to me earlier. To a certain extent, I think I did know how you felt about me but I was always afraid to face it. Magic and fighting are so much simpler. The more you train, the better you get, and the better outcome you see. Emotions like this don’t work that way, especially for me.” I looked at Tess but her expression didn’t change.

“Maybe you think I was making excuses when I said we were too young, but that’s really how I feel. Maybe you think you’re ready and maybe you are, but I know I’m not. I understand that we’re close in age but everyone matures at a different pace.” My mind worked furiously, trying to come up with the right words to say without telling Tess that I didn’t feel right going out with her when I had a mental age over thirty. “I care about you and I missed you when I came back home—I should’ve said this earlier and I’m sorry I didn’t, but I hope you don’t hate me for this.”

“You’re beating around the bush,” Tess responded, her expression softening.

“I can’t have a relationship with you right now,” I said firmly.

Tess raised a brow. “Right now?”

“Maybe when we’re older?” I said, making my statement sound more like a question.

My childhood friend clicked her tongue, crossing her arms. “You say that like I’m obviously going to wait for you. Anyway, I bet you’re just saying that to make time to find some other girl.”

My mind immediately pictured a thirteen-year-old me locking arms with a woman the same age as my mother and I immediately shook my head.

“I won’t be dating anyone anytime soon,” I reassured.

“How do you know? How am I supposed to trust that you’re not going to go and fall for someone else even if I do wait for you? I’m not sure you’ve noticed but I can be really selfish. If you say all of this now

and then go out and frolic with some other girl..." Tess's voice trailed off as she began to tremble. "I'd rather you just say you don't see me as anything other than a friend then—"

For one second, I shut off my conscience and managed a light peck on her lips. I suppressed the inner voice that screamed in disapproval and backed away from Tess, my face burning, truly feeling like a twelve-year-old boy in this moment.

"I hope this will buy me some time because that's about the limit of what I can do," I said as I quickly wiped my mouth with my sleeve, unable to look Tess in the eye.

There was no sound so I took a peek up only to see Tess in a daze, her eyes glossed over as her middle and index fingers touched her lips.

"Tess?" I whispered.

My childhood friend blinked and quickly removed her fingers from her lips. "Fine. But you better watch out, though—I'm pretty popular! If you make me wait too long, someone else is going to take me!"

"Deal." I smiled in relief from finally sorting things out with Tess when she suddenly went up on her toes and kissed me on the cheek.

I immediately retracted, surprised. "Tess, I thought I said—"

"Don't worry, stupid. That was just a thank you for saving me in class last week." She stuck out her tongue before turning around and running off into her dorm.

Sylvie, who had witnessed everything from atop my head, snickered.

Zip it, Sylv. Letting out a deep breath, I walked back to my dorm. I wondered if my childhood friend was willing to wait a few years... or even a decade, but I chose not to think about it any longer.

Tomorrow's problems will be solved by tomorrow's me.

The Beginning After The End – Chapter 62: My Team

TESSIA ERALITH'S POV:

Arriving at my room, I jumped into bed, my hands covering my burning face.

I couldn't help but let out soft shrieks of delight as I rolled back and forth across my sheets.

"Hehehehehe..." Oh no. I was laughing like a pervert.

But...but Art finally kissed me. He kissed me!

"Heehee..." Not being able to calm down, I wrapped myself in my blanket as I rolled around. The image of him leaning forward to kiss me filled my head, forcing my lips to curve up. It felt different from when I'd kissed him. I couldn't quite explain it but it was definitely a better feeling.

"I could get used to this..." I accidentally muttered aloud as I softly rubbed my lips. I rolled across my bed again in embarrassment as I recalled the event again.



I began to imagine what our marriage would be like. I wanted it to be super pretty. I wondered how our kids would look? Arthur was good-looking and I wasn't ugly either. It should be fine, right? But in order to get kids, we needed to...

I could almost feel steam coming out my ears as I imagined it. I mean, I learned about how babies were born from my home tutor but...

Nonononono it's too early! And besides... Arthur wanted me to give him some time. I wondered what he meant by that? Did he mean we were going to act like tonight never happened?

I didn't want that!

But was I allowed to get mad at him for that? Was I being too hard on him? I knew he had my best interest at heart but I couldn't be so wishy-washy about this, right?

What if another girl really did end up liking him too and he chose her? I was just a violent, spoiled girl after all; why would he choose me?

The more I thought about it, the more disheartened I became. It's, okay Tess. We're both still really young. Even if it does take time, I'm sure it'll work out eventually, right?

Gah! Stop discouraging yourself and let's just sleep, Tess!

ARTHUR LEYWIN'S POV:

I'd been getting used to having Sylvie wake me up. Usually a loud mental shout was enough to wake me up but today, I was woken up by a sharp bite on my nose.

"Kyu!"

I groaned as I woke up, rubbing my throbbing nose as Sylvie went back to sleep after doing her job. Sylvie seemed to be a lot more active at night as she took frequent naps throughout the day.

After washing up, I watched Elijah, still breathing loudly in his sleep while I had to wake up this early. We couldn't have that now, could we?

"Good morning!" I slapped my sleeping roommate on his behind.

"Ah! What? Huh?! What's going on?" Apparently, the sudden impact made him panic, because he got into a defensive position with his right hand straight out, ready to fire at his attacker.

"Nothing! Just saying good morning." I shrugged, strapping on the knife to my disciplinary committee uniform.

"Ugh... I have another two hours before class starts. You woke me up just to say good morning?" Elijah groaned as he wrapped himself with his blanket into a makeshift cocoon.

"Yup! I'm off to my first disciplinary committee meeting!" I took one last look to make sure I wasn't forgetting anything when Elijah popped his head out from underneath his blanket.

“Did something good happen? You’re a little bit too happy. It’s unsettling.” Whether it was because he was studying me or just trying to focus his vision on me since he wasn’t wearing his glasses, Elijah squinted his slightly puffy eyes.

“You’re just imagining things, Elijah,” I said with a light chuckle, quickly lacing my boots before heading towards the door.

“Suspicious...” he mumbled before succumbing to his body’s demands to go back to sleep.

Making sure no one was around, I jumped off the building and used wind augmentation to cushion my landing. Sylvie just floated down, which looked really silly to me with her oversized ears flopping against the wind.

Landing on top of my head with a soft plop, I took some time to test my body out with some stretches. I couldn’t say I was in great condition, but the improvement since yesterday made me nod in satisfaction. It was times like these that I really felt the effects of going through the assimilation of Sylvia’s dragon will.

Which reminded me...I’d have to help Tess with her assimilation. How was I supposed to act around her anyways? I couldn’t believe I kissed her yesterday.

Thinking back, I realized that even in my past life, I’d never gone past the point of kissing and it was always the other party that initiated. I’d never had an interest in falling in love. Rather, I feared love. I even avoided the aspect of unattached sexual relationships because I feared that the start of a physical relationship could lead to emotional attachments. I secluded myself in training aside from public appearances and fights, making sure I didn’t have anyone I held in importance, anyone that could be used as a tool against me.

What I’d learned most from this world wasn’t the magic or the fighting. No, what I’d realized was that this life has forced me to open up my calloused heart and allow people to hold significance to me. What this also meant was that I had to be stronger than my past self since I had people to protect this time.

Lost in my thoughts, I almost passed by the Disciplinary Committee Room. The DC had access to one of the bigger rooms in the academy so that it could double as a training room as well. I was a bit late since I woke up a little later than expected but it wasn’t too loud so I hoped I wasn’t the last one there.

As I opened the door, Curtis flew and crashed into the wall next to me with a thud!

“Still too weak!” I saw Theodore Maxwell’s disappointed face, his right fist raised.

“Ah, Arthur! You’re here!” Claire Bladeheart, who was spectating the duel from the side, waved her hands.

“Ugh... I can’t believe I still can’t land even a single hit on you, Theodore. Oh, hey Arthur.” Curtis turned his head towards me while rubbing his back.

“Do you need help?” I put my hand out while Sylvie wagged her tail but Curtis just shook his head.

“No, I’m okay. Besides, the duel isn’t over yet.” Curtis grimaced as he got back to his feet and picked up his sword.

Taking a seat next Claire on one of the couches, I watched as the duel between Curtis and Theodore resumed.

“HAH!” Curtis charged forward after augmenting his sword in a blazing fire but just as he was about to get into Theodore’s range, Curtis sidestepped instantly, leaving a charred footstep behind before appearing to Theodore’s right.

Theodore’s reaction was almost immediate as he lifted his brawny right arm at an uncanny speed.

“Fall!” Curtis’ assault failed as he crumbled to his knees, his sword landing heavily on the ground in front of Theodore.

Theodore had a smirk on his face but it soon turned serious as he realized Curtis’ plan.

“Explode!” Curtis shouted in a strained voice.

The sword that wasn’t burning but glowing a dim red shined brighter until flames exploded in all directions.

Claire focused on the smoke, assuming both the sword and Theodore was covered inside, but I tapped her shoulder and gestured for her to look up.

Theodore was in the air with his arms a bit burned and steaming but otherwise unharmed. Using gravity magic on himself, Theodore slowly floated down as he concentrated on his next spell.

Curtis was back to his feet with his sword in hand, already preparing another spell. I noticed Grawder restlessly swinging his tail from the other side of the room.

“All right! I think it’s time to stop!” Claire stood up and clapped her hand but it didn’t seem like either one of them heard her even speak. She sighed exasperatedly. “Kai, care to help me?” Claire glanced back at the narrow-eyed, smiling man.

“Got it, Boss.” Kai’s sleeves covered his arms so I didn’t know what he had hidden but with a swing of his arms, thin metal strings shot out towards Theodore and Curtis, forming a makeshift metal fence between them.

Even after augmenting my eyes, I couldn’t make out any specific elemental attribute in his skill, making me wonder exactly what he could do.

Both Curtis and Theodore stopped their spells and turned their heads towards Kai in confusion.

“Boss’ orders. Let’s stop the duel now, shall we gentlemen?” Kai’s smiling face remained unchanged as he retracted the numerous strings back into his sleeves.

“What did Kai do just there?” I asked Claire who was shaking her head at Curtis and Theodore.

“No one really knows. He keeps it a secret and from what I can tell, there isn’t any specific elemental attribute in his mana whenever he uses his skills,” she responded while shrugging.

“Have you taken an interest in me, Arthur?” Kai came behind me, leaning his head forward past my shoulder so his smiling face was right next to mine.

“Hardly. Just a bit curious as to what you just did there. It didn’t seem like you were manipulating metal, or using sound to control the metal strings,” I responded while pushing his face away from mine.

“So cold. I’d tell you but unfortunately, if I did, I’d have to kill you,” he replied nonchalantly, making me lift a brow.

“Oh? Is that a threat?” I challenged.

Noticing that the conversation was taking a turn for the worse, Claire butted in.

“Looks like we’re still missing quite a few people! Feyrith, Kathyln and Doradrea still aren’t here—ah, there they are!” she said as she pushed the both of us towards the door.

Feyrith was having a little quarrel with Doradrea about something while Kathyln came in behind them. I raised my hand to wave at Kathyln but as soon as our eyes made contact, she immediately turned her head away before walking off in another direction.

“Ah Arthur, my rival! Have you healed? I believe we still need to duel but I think it would be better to hold that off until after I finish working on a spell I’ve been practicing! It’s not because I’m scared to lose to you or anything. Just giving you more time to recover.” Feyrith came up beside me, putting his arm on my shoulder as he let out a hearty laugh.

“Now that everyone is here, I’d like you all to come sit down so we can start the meeting.” Claire ushered us towards the round table on the second floor.

The room consisted of two levels. The lower level was just a wide area with all sorts of equipment and also an arena for practice matches. To the side next to the equipment, a flight of stairs led to a second floor balcony that overlooked the lower level. The second floor was furnished with a chalkboard, some cabinets, and a big, oval table with exactly eight seats.

Claire sat at the very end of the table with the chalkboard behind her while Kai and Theodore sat to her right and left. I didn’t really know if there was an assigned seating arrangement so I remained standing, waiting for everyone else to sit down first. On Kai’s side sat Curtis and Feyrith while on Theodore’s side sat Doradrea and Kathyln. The only seat available was directly opposite of Claire’s seat so I just settled there and waited for the meeting to commence, my drowsiness from being up so early slowly overtaking my body.

I glanced over at Sylvie who hopped off my head and began playing with Grawder until our leader began talking.

“This is the first meeting with everyone present, as well as the first day we will actively start duty,” Claire announced in a serious voice.

“Although this is the first year this committee has existed, I’ve been working with Director Goodsky and our student council president on how we should efficiently structure and run the disciplinary committee in order to create an environment that will not tolerate bullying, dissented duels, as well as intruders. For that, we decided to split the disciplinary committee into two teams. These two teams are separated by underclassmen and upperclassmen. The upperclassmen—Theodore, Curtis, Kai and myself—will split into pairs and watch over the campus in the morning since we don’t have classes. The underclassmen—Kathyln, Feyrith, Doradrea and Arthur—will also split into two teams and go around campus in the

afternoon while the upperclassmen have classes.” Claire began writing all of our names on the board, divided into the teams she had already decided on.

Before I had the chance to raise my hand, Claire already knew what I was about to say and interjected.

“Since Arthur is taking both upper division and lower division classes, he will be waived from that duty. However, he is to be on standby at all times in case backup is needed. Also, I’ve gotten permission from Director Goodsky to allow you to be 10 minutes late to classes, so just take your time between classes and be on the lookout for any trouble.” She smiled in satisfaction as I put my arm back down.

“That being said, I’ve already discussed the matter of who will be scouting the campus alone between the underclassmen and Kathyln has volunteered to take on this task. Kathyln, remember that even though the upperclassmen are in class, we will still help you. You are a part of the disciplinary committee so if you’re caught in a situation where you’re not confident in being able to handle it yourself, call for help.” She turned her gaze to Kathyln while saying this. The princess simply nodded while Curtis wore a slight look of concern on his face.

Feyrith raised his hand. “How are we going to communicate with each other?” Feyrith raised his hand

“We haven’t told you guys yet but if you imagine any of the members in the disciplinary committee while placing your hand on the insignia on the sheath of your knife, the recipient’s knife will emit a bright light and a soft shock, notifying them who is in trouble. Each of the members’ knives has a distinct color so remember them well.” While Claire announced this, she began writing the different colors our DC knives would glow.

Claire – Pink

Kai – Silver

Theodore – Yellow

Feyrith – Green

Doradrea – Dark Red

Curtis – Red

Kathyln – Blue

Arthur – Black

I wondered how a black light would look. Everyone else’s colors were pretty self-explanatory and corresponded with their elements for the most part. It seemed like Feyrith got the green color because he was an elf.

“The last matter of business is surveillance at night. I know that this might be a bit too much for one person so we’ll be taking turns in pairs with this task.” Our leader looked around in case there were any disagreements.

“Can I volunteer to take over my sister’s shift as well? Call me overprotective but I’m not comfortable knowing Kathyln might be in danger while I’m fast asleep.” Curtis spoke up while scratching his head but looked at me specifically.

“Are you sure you can handle that, Curtis? It’s going to be tough doing two people’s shifts at night,” Claire asked.

I looked over at Kathyln, noticing that she wanted to interject but she kept her thoughts to herself.

“Kathyln is my partner for night duties, right? I can do it by myself,” I spoke up, knowing the real reason Curtis wanted to take over his shift. I could sort of understand from his perspective, being an older brother myself.

“You don’t have to...” Kathyln spoke as she stood up but I could tell she was conflicted and couldn’t find the words to say after.

“Hmm... well, since Kathyln is scouting by herself during the afternoon, I think this would be fair. Okay, I’ll allow it, but Arthur, Kathyln, I can already tell you two are the type to try and handle things on your own. However, I’m ordering you both as the leader to call for help immediately as soon as you think you need it.” She leaned forward on the table, stating her conditions in a firm voice.

“Got it,” I promised as Kathyln nodded.

“Okay, since all of the technical matters are settled, you guys are free to leave or stay here and practice until classes start. The room will always be open for DC members so think of this as a second house! I’ve already camped here for a couple of nights, haha!” Claire scratched the back of her head in embarrassment.

I let out a deep breath in relief. Looks like I could have a little less than an hour of sleep before my first class started. There were a couple of couches that looked perfect for a power nap on the lower floor.

Curtis gave me a meaningful pat on my back before he headed down but as I followed behind him, I felt a tugging on the waist of my pants from behind.

“Let’s spar for a bit, pretty boy! I’ve sparred with everyone else here but you.” Doradrea shot me an excited grin as she dragged me from behind onto the designated sparring arena.

“I’m still not fully healed, Doradrea. I don’t think this is the best idea,” I groaned as I was dragged helplessly.

“Stop being a baby! The best way to get rid of that soreness is to move around, don’t you know?” She let me go and walked over to the other side of the arena.

Claire walked towards us, giving me an apologetic look. She was about to stop the spar when Theodore walked past her and approached Doradrea as she was stretching.

“Move it,” he growled.

“Aww... no fair.” Doradrea grumbled as she slumped her shoulders, disappointed.

Great. A muscular male replaces my muscular female opponent.

Claire just sighed in defeat. "All right but Arthur is injured so this will only go on for a minute. Let me activate the barrier this time so we don't have any more cracked walls."

Sylvie, who was riding on top of Grawder, asked if I'd be okay so I just nodded in response.

I may be injured but I was excited since I'd wanted to duel against Theodore as well. I figured fighting against deviants might help me learn a thing or two from them.

"Anything you want to say before we start?" Theodore asked while he cracked his neck.

"Sure. Can I call you Theo if I win? It's only fair for me to give you a nickname since you already gave me one, right?" I shot him a smirk while I stretched my still aching body.

I could literally see veins popping on his head, as everyone's face twisted into a horrified expression.

"You sure are full of yourself, twerp. Fine, but if I win, you're going to be my little minion for the rest of your school life." He had a confident smile on his face as the rest of the DC members all got situated around the arena.

"Remember, this duel will last one minute or until someone lands the first hit. That's final!" Claire barked as she unsheathed her sword and stabbed it in the ground.

The both of us nodded in consent before Claire signaled for the duel to begin.

Theodore immediately took off, charging at me like a frenzied bull. I augmented my body using wind attribute mana to skirt around the arena, keeping my distance. Theodore's gravity magic wasn't something to take lightly since his powers had simultaneous offensive and defensive powers.

While it usually took a bit longer to use earth magic while using wind magic, I was able to muster up shards of earth the size of my leg in time to kick them at Theodore. I shot out the shards of earth at different lengths to gauge how far he was able to use his gravity manipulation.

Theodore didn't really get what I was doing as he kept charging at me, growing more and more frustrated from me running away and kicking rocks at him.

"Do you think I'll let you keep running around?" he roared as the rocks that I kicked towards him all started floating.

Theodore thrust himself toward me during the short span that he decreased the gravity around him, increasing his speed tremendously.

Holding in a smile, I put my plan into play. Manipulating the earth around me one last time, I launched a boulder the size of my body as I jumped away from my opponent.

With the area of decreased gravity surrounding him, Theodore was able to easily smack the boulder over him, but during the brief moment where his vision was blocked by the rock, I dashed toward him.

Enveloping wind to condense below my feet, I shot toward him at a speed that caught Theodore by surprise.

[Draft Step]

Using the technique that I had thought up by drawing inspiration from the flicker step technique, I accelerated toward him with the help of the strong gale behind me.

Theodore's initial expression of surprise turned into a c\*\*\*y grin as he clenched his fist.

"Fall," he snarled. The sudden change in gravity knocked the wind out of me as I had to fight to keep my body from slamming into the ground.

With a victorious grin on his wild, unshaven face, he took one last step to get in range for the final blow when I shot him a smirk and pointed upwards with my finger in response.

The boulder that Theodore knocked up fell directly on top of him from the abrupt change in gravity. The weight of the rock from the increased gravity flattened Theodore flat on his stomach in an almost comical position.

"STOP!&##8221;

Claire got in between the two of us as she made sure Theodore, who already regained consciousness, was okay. By that time, Theodore had already shoved the rock off of him as he silently dusted his uniform. He would probably get a nasty bruise on his back but his mana-enhanced body allowed him to avoid any serious injury—the rock wasn't too big after all.

"Good duel, Theo." I walked up to him and patted my opponent on the shoulder before bouncing out of the room with Sylvie trotting behind me.

Let's go find a bench to take a nap on, I sent to Sylvie.

The Beginning After The End – Chapter 63: Baby Steps

"Did you guys do your homework?" I sat down on top of the podium so I could get a better view of the class while I fixed my hair.

I'd slept through most of my Fundamentals of Mana Manipulation class so I felt a lot better. Looking around from the center of the stage, I saw my students glance desperately at each other in hopes that one of them had the answers to the questions I asked them yesterday.

"Looks like there's no choice but for me to answer the question," Feyrith finally sighed before standing up.

"The mana core is an excellent way to easily and accurately measure the level of the mage's power because it is correlated with how much effort and time that mage has spent on condensing and refining mana from their surroundings into their core." He finished off with a swish of his hair while sitting down.

"No." I hopped off the stage and walked toward the shocked Feyrith.

"It certainly is an easy way to gauge the mage's power but it's far from accurate. Princess Kathyln, if you see an ordinary fighter that stood at two meters and weighed almost three hundred pounds full of muscle, what is your assessment on that fighter?" I turned my gaze toward the princess that was sitting next to the embarrassed elf.

"I can expect the fighter to have robust strength," she finally said after pondering the simple question.



“Correct! All we can tell is that the oaf is probably freakishly strong. Does that say anything else about his combat ability? Yes, he’s strong, but in order to be a great combatant, there are other factors such as agility, technique, mental fortitude, experience, etc. The stage a mage’s mana core is only determines how much ‘muscle’ he or she has, but it doesn’t explain much else in regards to the other factors. Refining your mana core to higher stages is still important, of course, but if that’s the only factor you use in gauging your opponent’s level, you’re setting yourself up for defeat.” I saw some students start jotting down notes so I caught my breath.

The pretentious student with glasses raised her hand after she finished writing down her notes. “Question!” she declared.

“Yes, Miss Myrtle?” I found it amusing how much her name suited her character.

“If trying to sense the opponent’s mana core isn’t an accurate way of gauging his or her level, what do we do?” she asked with an expression that made it seem as if she was testing me.

“You don’t. Just assume that the opponent is stronger than you. Gauging the mana core stage of anyone should just be used to satiate your curiosity but nothing beyond that. Even if sensing the mana core level could accurately gauge the fighting strength of your opponent, what are you going to do if your opponent’s fighting strength is lower than yours? Go easy on him? Pick on him because you know you’ll win? What do you do if his fighting strength is higher than yours? Run away? Chances are, if you’re in a situation where both of you are actively sensing each other’s mana core, then running away won’t be an option.” I paused for a minute.

“Being overconfident because you found out that your mana core is higher than your opponent’s can make you careless and getting scared if your opponent’s mana core is higher than yours can make you feel hopeless. Bottom line is, life isn’t so simple that you can accurately know whether or not you can beat someone based on the color of their mana core. There are cases of fighters beating careless mages because the mages got sloppy from being too arrogant. Always assume the opponent is stronger than you and try your best. If that opponent is weaker than you, then you put an end to the fight quickly to save him the humiliation. If that opponent is stronger, congratulations, you’ve overcome the mental limit you guys have been holding onto all your lives.” I felt like some inspirational speaker rather than a lecturer.

I walked back to the podium where Sylvie was now taking a nap and continued speaking.

“Now, for the next piece of homework. Any of you figure out what I did last class with the two wind spells?” I asked, leaning back against the podium.

A hollow silence filled the room.

I let out a sigh. I guess being spoon-fed answers all their lives really took a toll on their critical thinking skills.

"I'll do a little demonstration for the augmenters' answer first." Rolling Sylvie to the side, I took out two pieces of paper from underneath her. I crumpled one of the papers into a small ball and showed it to the class.

"Watch." I put the ball on my right palm and inhaled deeply, building the suspense.

"Fwoo." Utilizing all of the air in my lungs, I managed to blow the crumpled ball of paper about a meter away from me.

The students stared at me with blank faces from the anticlimactic outcome.

Holding my fingers up to silence any students about to argue what the point of that was, I rolled the other paper I had into a makeshift tube. Packing the ball tightly into the back end of the tube, I inhaled deeply one more time.

Letting out another deep breath, the crumpled ball of paper shot out more than fifteen feet in front of me before bouncing on the ground.

The faces of some of the students lit up in understanding while others voiced their surprise. I couldn't help but grin as the students all brightened up and took notes. Princess KathyIn furiously scribbled in her notebook while Feyrith stared blankly at the ball of paper on the ground.

"Since many of you seemed to understand what I just did, can someone please enlighten the rest of the class?" I asked as I picked up the pieces of paper I had littered.

"It has to do with concentrating mana into a small point, then compressing it and shooting it out, right Professor?" A timid girl with a huge spear next to her responded in a hushed tone.

"Correct! Augmenters are raised to utilize the plethora of mana channels they have so we unconsciously use a lot of our mana channels for many of our spells, diluting it. It doesn't matter so much when you use it on your body but the spell is weakened greatly when attempting to cast a long-range spell." I demonstrated by widening the paper tube I rolled up. Blowing through one end, the ball I put inside loosely just dropped down in front of me.

"It'll be hard to get used to at first but being able to better control your mana channels will help you greatly. Now, the Conjurers' turn." I picked up the crumpled piece of paper I shot out again.

"Since conjurers naturally have much fewer mana channels compared to mana veins, they naturally shoot their spells in a compressed form, whether it's out of their body directly, or by affecting an area to have the mana alter it into the form of their desired spell. What conjurers need to do is utilize the raw amount of mana they can absorb to compensate for their lack of mana channels. Close your eyes and try to imagine this." The students looked at one another, confused, but they lowered their gaze nonetheless, waiting for my next instructions.

"Imagine both conjurers' and augmenters' bodies to be pools of water. We'll say that leaves are particles of mana. For an augmenters' body, picture small bundles of leaves being dropped in various locations over the pool. While these bundles may be small, because there are so many, they begin to spread and join the other leaves that spread from other directions until the surface of the water is covered in leaves. That is the essence of body enhancement. Now, for conjurers, imagine just one gigantic ball of leaves drop into the pool of water. Because it comes from a single location, it may take

longer for it to spread, but in the end, the leaves will still be able to cover the surface of the pool. That is how body enhancement should work for conjurers.” The class remained silent as they opened their eyes and pondered over what I had just said.

“The reason why all of you conjurers injured yourselves while trying to absorb the spell you conjured is because you didn’t use the mana from your core. The only mana that you’re completely immune to is the mana refined in your mana core. Even that, after your mana influences the environment into a spell, can hurt you. Therefore, conjurers will need to utilize both mana from the atmosphere and mana from their mana core for a spell and integrate it into their body, or drop the big pile of leaves to make it spread over the pool of water.” As I finished explaining, I motioned for the class to come down onto the stage and start practicing. For the rest of the class, I went around helping them while giving them little tips on how to better visualize what they needed to do.

After the giant bell rang, Sylvie stirred awake and hopped on top of my head as I dismissed class. I was surprised when I overheard some students grumbling to their peers that the class was too short.

I took the long route to my next class to take up more time while I did a broad surveillance. I messed around with sending very faint pulses of wind to try and use it as a sort of three-dimensional radar but it proved to not be as useful as I thought it would be. Earth Pulse was also of little use since I could only detect the very basics, like how many people were in the area, not if they were actually in combat or not. Even worse, the buildings and trees diluted the accuracy.

I arrived at Gideon’s class late but he just motioned for me to hurry on to my seat before he resumed talking.

“Hey. Why are you so late?” Emily whispered to me.

“Disciplinary committee duties. I have to go around school until ten minutes after class starts,” I responded, lowering my voice so Gideon wouldn’t hear.

“All right! Let’s get in pairs and work on our project. The materials are in the back but don’t all of you go at once.” He took a seat and began reading over something while the class got up to collect the materials needed for the Light-Producing Artifact. I was about to walk over as well when Emily stopped me.

“I already have all of the materials we need for an LPA. Let’s just get started.” She rummaged through her oversized bag, finding the various necessary components. After laying out all the things we needed, she looked at me and motioned for us to start.

Building the LPA wasn’t easy but Emily seemed fairly impressed by how fast I had caught on. Even if she was only a twelve-year-old, her being a genius and all made me a bit happy.

The rest of class was spent tinkering around with some of the various parts of artifacts that Emily had brought with her until Gideon dismissed us. As I was about to leave, he grabbed me by the back of my shirt and pulled me toward him.

“Brat. Let’s catch up sometime. We have a lot to talk about.” He gave me a devious grin but otherwise just patted me on the back.

“Mhmm. We should grab some tea, Professor.” I waved back before leaving the room with Emily.

'Papa, Avier told me to head over to the training room again.' Sylvie thumped my nose with her paw to grab my attention.

Is Avier Director Goodsky's green owl? How can you talk with it? I asked my bond but she didn't really know why either.

"Hey Emily, I have to head over to the library so I'll be skipping lunch. Go ahead without me!" I waved at my friend.

"Do you want me to go with you?" She looked at me but I just shook my head.

"It's fine. Go find Elijah for me! He'll be lonely if I'm not there." I shot her a smile before running off in the direction of the library/training rooms.

"Good afternoon, Mr. Leywin," Chloe greeted me with a professional smile and a bow before motioning me to the back door.

"Nice to see you again, Chloe," I smiled back, following behind her with Sylvie wagging her tail on top of my head.

After passing by the scary man, I made my way downstairs without the help of Chloe this time. Hopefully Elijah won't be too bored hanging out with Emily, right Sylv?

"Kyu~" 'He'll be okay!' my bond reassured me.

Reaching my room, I placed my right palm against the cold, giant doors, and a bright light once again greeted me.

"Boo!" Tessia jumped from the side of the door with her hands out wide.

"Hey, Tess," I responded casually.

"Aww... you weren't scared. No fun," she grumbled while catching Sylvie who had jumped off my head.

"You'll have to try a lot better than that. Come on, let's get started with your assimilation." I pushed her toward the center of the training room. It was amazing how dense the air was with mana in this room compared to outside. Even the very fact that there was grass and a waterfall put me in awe every time I came in.

"How's your body been feeling lately? Are you still getting symptoms of rejection from your Beast Will?" I asked while Tess took a seat near the pond.

"I haven't gotten any since the last time we were here," she responded but turned quiet afterwards.

Tess looked over her shoulder and stared at me, batting her long grey eyelashes. "Hey, Art?"

"Hmm?"

"I'm sorry."

"For what?"

“Well...compared to you, I’m so emotional and so I feel like you get overwhelmed and just end up following my selfishness.” Tess’ gaze shifted down as she said this.

“Ah, so you do know,” I smirked in response, earning me a smack on the arm.

“We’ve known each other for how long, Tess? At this point, you can trust that you’ve seen all sides of me, even the ones I don’t want to show. Even knowing that, the fact that you accept me and have patience with me, I’m grateful. Don’t ever think that what I’m doing is out of obligation.” Ruffling the downhearted princess’s hair, we began the assimilation.

Tess’ mana core had come a long way. At her age, being a solid orange stage conjurer was on the level of a genius. While she wouldn’t be able to refine her mana core until the assimilation was over, it shouldn’t affect her too much. While mine took years, I estimated that with my help, it should only take a couple more weeks for her to completely assimilate with the elderwood guardian’s beast will.

“Let’s end it here today.” I patted Tess’ back to signal that we were done.

“Thanks.” Tess shot me a shy smile as we both sit in the grass, the only sound coming from the waterfall and Sylvie’s soft breathing.

“I-I know you said to give you time but...do you think I can maybe hold your hand right now? Just for a bit? If not, it’s okay—I won’t be mad.” Tess averted her gaze to avoid mine. While her bangs covered her face, she couldn’t hide her red ears poking out.

I gently grabbed Tess’ right hand with my left and squeezed gently. While our fingers weren’t interlocked, the warmth from her hands spread onto mine.

“Is this okay?” I tried to take a peek at Tess’ face but she quickly turned her head away. I couldn’t help but smile helplessly when she nodded her head in response.

For a couple of seconds, time seemed to go slower as we just sat there, hands locked. It intrigued me that such a seemingly impractical action could fill me with a sense of calm.

#### The Beginning After The End – Chapter 64: Field Trip

For the past several weeks, nothing noteworthy happened, yet I was kept busy enough to not have time to visit my family. Disciplinary committee duties took up all of my remaining time not designated to school and training.

The class I taught had a harder time than I expected when it came to “divergent training,” which was what I decided to call it. The whole aspect of focusing mana into a single point proved to be difficult for all of the augmenters in the class while reabsorbing a conjured spell was an even more arduous task for the conjurers.

So far, out of the augmenters, only a student named Benson managed to do anything remotely close to what I had in mind. As for the conjurers, only Kathyln succeeded in reabsorbing her spell and enhancing her body. Even then, she only succeeded in augmenting her hand. Feyrith was a close second as he was the only other student on the brink of success.

My Deviant Magic Theory class had been moving along quite slowly as our professor explicitly explained that she would cover new material after we finished our mid-semester tests. Since a semester was

sixteen weeks long and we'd only gone through four weeks of school, it'd take another four weeks until she'd start going over what I wanted to know.

"Are you excited for the class dungeon excursion this weekend?" Tess leaned in closer as she asked.

The two of us, along with Sylvie, were inside the training room during lunch. I had just finished helping her with assimilation. By my estimation, Tess needed about one or two more weeks to fully assimilate, which worried me because, until then, her magic use would be very limited.

"Hmm? Eh, we're only exploring the first three floors, right? I doubt we'll find anything worth getting excited over." I just shrugged.

This Saturday, we were to have a one-night trip to the outskirts of the Beast Glades with our Team-Fighting Mechanics class. Professor Glory received permission from Director Goodsky on the condition that we were not allowed to go past the third floor of the dungeon we planned on exploring.

The dungeon was a minor one and a popular site for new adventurers since the mana beasts in the upper levels were only E class, so Professor Glory thought it would be a great way to have the class get in some real life team-fighting mechanics practice.

"Pshhh... You're no fun. I bet you're actually really nervous that we'll be in the Beast Glades. I heard about it a lot from Grandpa. He says that it's filled with a lot of mysteries and wonders but also dangers. Grandpa said to never truly trust any source of information about the Beast Glades because it always changes." Tess got lost in her thoughts, fantasizing about how exciting our short trip was going to be.

"We're going to be fighting against real mana beasts! Can you believe it? I mean, I've fought against a couple in Elshire Forest while I was training with Grandpa but I heard mana beasts are different in the Beast Glades. You know, more vicious. We're going to be sleeping in the dungeon too! That's so exciting!" Her eyes began to sparkle as she imagined camping underground, surrounded by mana beasts.

Giving her a soft flick to her forehead, I woke up Tess from her dreamland. "Just remember, you're probably not even at half your strength right now and the assimilation isn't going to be completed in time for the class expedition. Don't get full of yourself."

"Oww... I know, I know! Sheesh, you don't have to baby me so much." She pouted while rubbing her forehead.

"Do you remember when we slept together in the same tent?" My face turned into an evil grin as Tess' face turned red immediately.

"Kyu?" Sylvie tilted her head in curiosity since she hadn't been born when this happened.

"What did you say again? Ahh!" Putting on a frightened face, I look at my blushing childhood friend.

"A-Arthur? W-Well! You see... beasts will more likely appear if they notice you because they will see that you are a child. Therefore, I propose that for our s-safety, that it would be better for you to c-come inside the tent," I said in a high-pitched voice, mocking Tess.

"Uuu! You asked for it!" She jumped on top of me and started poking me hard as I continued laughing.

“Owowowow! Hahaha~ okay! I’m sorry, I give, I give! Tess... hahaha... I’ll stop!” Tears formed in my eyes as I continued laughing and crying in pain.

“Kyu!” ‘Me too, I want to play too!’ Sylvie hopped around us.

Eventually, she came to a stop as I laid panting on the ground, catching my breath, with Tess sitting on top of me. Looking at my childhood friend, I noticed that her face was still red. Realizing almost immediately what sort of position we were in, I couldn’t help but get hot as well, as Tess lowered her head closer to mine.

“Hoho~ I see you two are getting along well. Virion will surely be happy.” The voice caught the both of us by surprise and Tess immediately got off me while we distanced ourselves from each other in embarrassment.

Director Goodsky walked up to us with an amused look on her face. How she got in without either of us noticing was beyond me but I couldn’t hide the awkwardness in my face as she looked at me.

Saving us some face, Director Goodsky changed the topic. “Fufu~ how is the assimilation going?”

“It-It’s going well! Art helped me a lot these past couple of weeks and I feel a lot better! I haven’t been feeling any pain from the rejection lately and as long as I don’t use magic too much, I think I’ll be okay!” The flustered Tess scrambled her words as she flailed her arms to hide her embarrassment.

“She should be fully assimilated with her beast will in about a week or two,” I clarified after calming myself.

“Hmmm...” Director Goodsky nodded at me before kneeling down in front of the still red Tess. Gently placing her hand above Tess’ stomach, Director Goodsky closed her eyes to sense Tess’ mana core.

After a brief moment, she retracted her hand and nodded, satisfied. “Good, good. I’m glad that there were no troubles along the way. I knew I could trust you, Arthur,” she said to me before getting back up.

“Where have you been these past couple of weeks though, Director? You were always in contact from what I heard, but I noticed you haven’t been inside the academy for a while now. Did you just get back?” I said, tilting my head. My eyes couldn’t help focusing on the small cut she had on her other hand.

“Ah, yes. I’ve been away for some personal reasons. I am back now though, so come to my office if you need anything.” Director Goodsky quickly covered her hand and gave me a soft, grandmotherly smile. “I better get going now, though. I have a lot of work to catch up on. Be sure not to overexert yourself, little one. Be especially careful while you are inside the dungeons. One should never underestimate even the lowest level mana beasts.” Director Goodsky gently patted Tess’ hair before disappearing with a wisp.

“S-So what are your plans after this?” Tessia said, trying to break the awkward silence that the Director had left us.

“After classes, there’s an emergency meeting for the disciplinary committee since Curtis, Claire and I are going to be away from campus over the weekend. We’ll have to work on some of the details in case an emergency arises while we aren’t here. After that, I’ll probably go back home for the first time in a while and sleep there. I’ll get back to campus by tomorrow morning in time to head out for the excursion. What about you?” I said while leaning back.

“Well, Professor Glory said there won’t be any class today since she wanted us to rest before the excursion tomorrow so I’m free until the student council meeting. We have to go over a couple of things on the agenda since both Clive and I won’t be there either.” Tess responded a lot more calmly now. I had to admit she looked pretty cute, sitting on the ground and playing with Sylvie’s paws.

After spending a bit more time talking to Tess, I eventually had to leave to go to my remaining classes. Even though we didn’t have our Team-Fighting Mechanics class, my other two classes seemed to drag on forever as we already started reviewing for our mid-semester exams.

“That will be it for today, class. Remember to keep up with your studies instead of procrastinating and cramming for everything the night before. I know you all love doing that,” Professor Mayner said sarcastically as he handed out some review sheets on basic spell formations. After my last class was over, I trudged on towards the disciplinary committee room with Sylvie weighing down particularly heavily on my head tonight.

“I trust that you guys will be able to handle keeping the academy in check while the three of us are out. We’ve been through a couple of the emergency procedures these past two weeks so I’m confident that everything will be fine. As you all know, Kai is in command while I am out. Remember that Director Goodsky is back and on campus so if things go for the worse, don’t hesitate to have her help, although, unless it’s serious, I doubt there will be a need to. Dismissed!” Claire clapped her hands as the rest of us got up.

“Twer...I mean, Arthur. I want another practice match with you.” Theo placed a hand on my shoulder as I headed down the stairs.

“No! It’s my turn. You lost to him last time so I get to try now!” Doradrea squeezed between us and looked up at me with her masculine face.

“That didn’t count! It was a lucky break that he just had, that’s all.” Theo refuted, his face red from both anger and embarrassment.

“No can do, Theo, Doradrea. I’m going home to my family tonight. My driver is already waiting for me outside of the academy,” I shrugged, hopping down the stairs without giving them the time to convince me to stay.

“You have the protection ring that Father gave you, right? Use it immediately if you feel like you’re in trouble. Promise me that, okay?” I heard Curtis worriedly nag his younger sister. We’d be leaving early tomorrow morning so tonight was probably the last time he’d be able to see her until we got back Sunday night.

Kathyln just responded with a silent nod, her face expressionless as always. She caught me looking at the both of them and quickly turned her head away. Curtis left his sister and walked towards me.

“I’ll see you tomorrow morning then, Arthur. I heard Professor Glory was thinking of assigning teams. Let’s join the same team if we can,” he said, giving me a fist bump to the arm.

“Yeah, sounds good.” I offered a friendly nod. Before walking out I gave everyone a wave goodbye.



It was already pretty dark outside with the only source of light coming from the soft glow of the floating orbs. The campus grounds gave off a very mystical feeling at night, totally different from how the world was in my previous life.

Upon reaching the main gate to the academy, a familiar driver was waiting for me. "Good evening, Mr. Arthur. I take it that you have prepared everything?" he said while taking off his hat and giving me a slight bow.

"Yeah. The meeting ran a little late so let's leave right away." I got into the carriage after my driver opened the door for me.

I dozed off during the ride back home so it felt like the familiar Helstea Mansion came into view a lot faster than I'd expected.

"We have arrived, Mr. Leywin. Have a great night." Opening the door, the polite driver tipped his hat once again as I stepped off the carriage. Walking up the stairs brought up nostalgic thoughts of when I'd come back from the kingdom of Elenoir and when I came back from the Dire Tombs. This was probably the first time I was coming back home in a while without giving my parents a reason to worry for my life.

Before even having the chance to knock, the giant front door swung open and an Ellie missile shot out at a speed that surprised me.

"BROTTTHERRR! Welcome hommeeeee!" Ellie wrapped her arms around my waist as I mustered up the strength to keep the both of us from toppling down the stairs.

"Kyu!" Sylvie hopped off my head and onto Ellie's, licking her face.

"Haha~ that tickles, Sylvie!" My sister unwrapped herself from me as she held Sylvie and tickled her back.

"I was wondering what the noise was; you're back a little late, Son!" My father leaned against the front door and gave me a grin.

"The meeting ran a little late. It's been awhile, Dad." I gave my father a hug as my sister followed behind me, still cuddling with my bond.

"Ah! You're back, Art. You must be so tired." My mother, who was upstairs, ran down and wrapped her arms around me.

"Hey, Mom. Yeah, I'm back." I smiled, accepting the family love I cherished so much.

"How's your body? Are you all better now?" My mother examined my body, lifting up my shirt and turning me around to make sure I didn't have a wound left on me.

"Haha, I'm fine now. You're worrying too much." I gave her a comforting smile but I couldn't help but remember the short conversation I had had with my father about why my mother wasn't able to heal me back then. However, I quickly shook the thoughts from my head. I was sure there was a reason and the only thing I could do was wait for her to tell me.

"Brother, how long are you staying?" Ellie was practically hopping around me as we all headed towards the living room.

"I'm leaving early tomorrow morning." I let out a sigh.

"Wha~at? Why?" My sister's face visibly saddened, her shoulders slumping at my response.

"Yeah, why are you leaving so soon?" my father chimed in, taking a seat on the sofa.

"One of my classes has an excursion to the Beast Glades tomorrow for one night. We leave in the morning so I'll have to head out pretty early at dawn." I was already tired at the thought of waking up that early.

"The Beast Glades?!" My mother's face turned pale with concern. I wasn't surprised since I'd almost died the last time I was in the Beast Glades. Even my father had a worried look on his face.

"Don't worry. We're only going to be on the outskirts and our professor will be with us at all times. Besides, I still have the ring." I pulled out the ring that the Helstea family had given us from my pocket. The ring used mana circulation to indicate to the other ring-holder whether I was still alive or not. I kept it off while I was at school since I didn't really have a need for it but I brought it just in case.

"But still... is it mandatory for you to go?" My mother furrowed her brows, the concern refusing to leave her face.

"We'll be fine. It's one of the lowest-ranked dungeons and we're not allowed to go below the third floor anyways." I comforted my mother.

She still wasn't entirely happy with the whole situation but she just kept silent, giving me a hesitant nod. The four of us spent a few more hours just catching up while Sylvie fell asleep on Ellie's lap. Ellie was apparently doing well in her ladies' school while my father and mother both still looked very healthy and in love. It'd only been a few weeks since I'd last seen them so there weren't really any surprises. Upon my asking where the Helstea family was, Father said that Vincent and Tabitha were both out for a couple of days on a business trip to a different city.

Eventually, my parents ushered my sister and I into our rooms since it was pretty late. I almost fell asleep while taking a shower and after drying myself; I couldn't help but let out a big sigh of relief as I sunk into bed.

It was good to be back home.

Before I could get too comfortable, a series of knocks sounded from my door.

I turned my head, too tired to get up, and I saw a small head peeking out from the other side of the door.

"C-Can I sleep with you tonight, Brother?" Ellie walked in with her arms clinging onto a stuffed animal.

"Sure," I smiled, lifting the blanket next to me so she could get under.

"Hehe, yay!" Ellie jumped into the bed, making herself comfortable. The bed was more than big enough for the both of us but she scooted in close and faced me.

"Goodnight." Patting my baby sister's head, the both of us fell asleep to each other's steady breaths.

The Beginning After The End – Chapter 65: Widow's Crypt

“BROTHER! WAKE UP!!” My sister’s voice pounded through my head as she screamed at the top of her lungs directly next to my ear.

“What? What’s going on?” My eyes still half-closed, I whipped my head back and forth to see if there was an emergency.

“Sheesh! You s\*\*k at waking up, Brother.” Ellie probably woke up not too long ago, evident by her bedhead.

“Haha, you hair looks crazy.” I shot her a grin as I ruffled her hair.

“Eek! Stop it! Your hair looks weird too!” Hopping out of bed, my sister ran out of my room, reminding me to wash up.

“Aye aye!” I gave my sister an exaggerated salute, making her giggle, before going downstairs.

Sylvie woke up on her own from my sister’s shouting but her eyes kept blinking slowly as she unstably toddled behind me.

After washing up, I made sure I had a few basic necessities on me. This included my seal bracelet, my dimension ring with Dawn’s Ballad stored inside, the other ring used to signal my mother if I was in trouble, and the feather Sylvia left me that I used to cover Sylvie’s bond mark on my forearm.

The feather wasn’t necessary to cover the mark, but I liked to keep it on me just as a memento. Having a part of Sylvia with me always comforted me.

Walking downstairs, my nose picked up on the soft scent of a meaty soup. When I reached the kitchen, I spotted my parents and little sister sitting around the table, drowsiness still evident on their faces from being up early at dawn.

“Hope you don’t mind. The chef is cooking breakfast for you. We’re probably going to go back to sleep after we see you off.” My mother gave me a tired smile.

I pulled up a chair and took a seat next to Ellie. “Not at all. In fact, you really didn’t have to wake up and see me off.”

“Be vigilant, no matter how easy you think the dungeon may be. It’s called a dungeon because you never know of the dangers inside,” my father warned me, his bedhead ablaze.

Looking at my mother, the strain on her face was hard not to notice as she struggled for the right words. “...Just, please be careful, Arthur. I know how strong you are but I can’t stand it every time I see you hurt, it’s just that...” Her voice faded at the end.

“Hmm?” My mind flashed back to what my father had said in the hospital room back at Xyrus Academy; the event that made her unable to heal anyone seriously injured.

“It-It’s nothing. Just be safe.... and keep your eyes on that girl, Tessia, as well. You have to protect her if things get tough, okay?” Giving me a gentle smile that didn’t seem to reach her eyes, she reached forward and patted my head.

The house chef brought in my food at this time, which consisted of dry bread and a creamy soup that I assumed was used to dip my bread in. After Sylvie had a nibble on the bread, she whined and just curled up again. By the time I'd finished, the sun was starting to peek out from the mountains.

"Are you going to be coming home right after your dungeon excursion?" my father asked after giving me a hug.

"No, not right after. I'll be back for a whole week next week though, for break. There's some kind of special festival going on in the city, right?" My professors had all announced it a few weeks in advance that once every ten years, there was a phenomenon that occurred. Supposedly, during that entire week, the mana density in this continent reached its peak, giving mages the resources to make breakthroughs and even allowing non-mages to experience what it's like to feel mana. For that week, classes were cancelled and students were allowed to either stay on campus or go back home to meditate and train as much as possible.

"Ah, right! The Aurora Constellate is happening next week. So you're going to stay here for the festival too?" My mother's mood brightened.

"Wow! A whole week?" My drowsy sister perked up at this and pulled on my sleeves.

"Yup, that's the plan. Let's all go to the festival together." Looking at my family, I gave them a smile and hugged my sister and mother before walking down the stairs.

"Be careful!" my mother shouted one last time while waving. Waving back at them, I stepped inside the carriage. Once inside, I followed Sylvie's lead, catching up on my sleep until we arrived.

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"Arthur!" Stepping out of the carriage, I spotted Curtis waving at me, his smile wide and genuine.

"How was your trip back home? Did you get to catch up with your family?" Claire patted me on the back when I reached the group of students waiting at the front gate.

"Good, you made it!" Professor Glory gave me a smile too as she began her headcount. Looking around, besides Curtis and Claire, I saw Clyde, Lucas, and a few other students that I never really paid attention to. I did one more quick check but didn't see Tess, and by the frantic look on his face, neither did Clyde.

"Sorry I'm late!" Once Tess ran through the front gate, she caught her breath, her face flushed and hair messy.

"You're the last one, Princess Tessia. We can start heading out now." Professor Glory took note of everyone's presence once more and nodded in satisfaction before turning around and leading the class of fifteen students to the teleportation gate.

I glanced back to see Tess walking alongside Clyde when she caught my gaze. Giving me a shy smile of affirmation, I replied with a small wave but otherwise continued making small talk with Curtis and Claire until we arrived at the gate.

The guard stationed at the gate adjusted the settings as he asked our professor a few questions. After several minutes, Professor Glory signaled for us to enter through the gate one by one, stepping in

herself after all of us. Again, my stomach turned from the feeling of traveling through, but luckily, the trip never lasted more than a few seconds.

“Welcome! I assume for most of you, this is the first time you guys have stepped foot in the Beast Glades, correct?” Professor Glory chimed while placing her hands on her hips.

“Hmph. I’ve been here countless times. I was an A-class adventurer after all.” Lucas stepped forth with his chest out. With this, a couple impressed murmurs from the students made Lucas even more arrogant until Professor Glory replied.

“Ah, yes. I’ve heard from Director Goodsky that you were indeed an adventurer. I’ve also been notified that you had your license revoked due to classified reasons.” Raising an eyebrow, Professor Glory continued on.

“Tch. It’s all because of that damned masked b\*\*\*\*\*d.” The professor didn’t hear Lucas mutter under his breath as he leaned against his staff.

“Right now, we’re near the edge of the Grand Mountains. If we walk a few hours this way, we’ll arrive at a famous pub of gathering called Dragonspine Inn. Back when I was an adventurer, that was the place to chat and get information on various mana beasts and dungeons. We’ll be going to a rather low-level dungeon so don’t worry too much. I will also be with you at all times but I’ll refrain from helping unless it is absolutely necessary so don’t look to me for answers.” Professor Glory waved her right hand and from her dimension ring appeared a small pile of black cloth.

“These are shawls that you guys will need to wear inside the dungeon. The dungeon we’re exploring is called Widow’s Crypt. It’s a fairly straightforward dungeon without any traps or mazes so don’t worry about getting lost. It is, however, very cold in there, which is why you need these shawls. The mana beasts you’ll mostly be facing are nasty little creatures called snarlers. There are two types of snarlers in this dungeon that you’ll need to be wary of: the minion snarlers and the queen snarler. The minion snarlers are the ones you guys will be facing. Their queen burrows to the bottom floor of the dungeon so you won’t see it, but just know the difference. You’ll see what the minions look like once we go inside, but for now, we’re going to split you up into three teams of five.” As Professor Glory finished informing us, she pulled out a small piece of paper from the inside of the shawl she was wearing.

“I’ve already decided on how teams will be split so take a step forward as I call you. Curtis, Claire, Dorothy, Owen, and Marge; you guys will make up the first team.” Our professor motioned for them to pick up their shawls and step to the side. She then called the next five students, which left me with a bitter feeling.

“That leaves us with Arthur, Lucas, Clive, Tessia and Roland.” she said as she pointed at the pile of shawls left.

I had to be in the same team as Lucas again? Was she doing this on purpose? No, there were only fifteen students in the class and she had no idea that I was an adventurer before. But she was also the one that stopped my little scuffle with Lucas.

Debating whether or not to ask to change with someone, I ultimately decided to stay after remembering what my mother said this morning. Even if she hadn’t said it, I didn’t trust Lucas being in the same team as Tess. I should be there just in case.

“Any questions? No? Okay, then it’s settled. It shouldn’t take us more than two hours to reach the dungeon entrance so let’s hurry.” With that, we took off, taking long strides amidst the thick trees covering most of the sunlight.

We all traveled in silence, most of the students scared that they might attract unwanted attention from the mana beats that might be nearby. Soon, the trees cleared up as we began descending down a slope.

“We’re almost here. There’ll be a place to stay on standby next to the dungeon so don’t go inside.” With that, our professor stepped to the back, doing a headcount again while each of us carefully slid down the steep slope leading to the dungeon entrance.

“Before we go in, are you sure you want to bring your bond inside the dungeon, Arthur?” Professor Glory shot me a concerned look.

What do you say? Do you want to go hunting since we’re at the Beast Glades anyway? I mentally transmitted to Sylvie.

‘Sure!’ With that, my bond hopped off of my head and disappeared into the woods for the wrong reason that everybody else was thinking right now.

“Good choice, it’ll probably be safer if she stays out here and lays low.” Professor Glory gave me a nod before climbing up onto a rock so she could see everyone.

“Now. Split off into your groups and get to know each other. You guys have probably seen what everyone in your group is like from class but share your strengths and weaknesses. Communication and trust is vital in team-fighting. You’ll also have to decide on a leader before we go inside.” As our professor took a seat on the rock, our group came together and sat in a circle. While everyone looked at each other, not wanting to speak, the only one in our group that I didn’t really know, Roland, spoke up.

“Ahem! My name is Roland Alderman and I am a water attribute augmenter! My hobbies are relaxing, shopping, going on dates with pretty girls and...”

“No one asked for your hobbies,” Clive interrupted while massaging the bridge of his nose in irritation.

“Well someone’s a little grumpy. Anywho... My strength is in mid-range fighting, using a water whip skill that was passed down from my family. My weakness is close-range combat. Next!” he finished, tossing the imaginary baton to me, who was sitting to his left.

“Arthur Leywin. I’m a wind and earth attribute augmenter. I’m adept at all ranges but prefer mid-to-close,” I stated simply, looking directly at Lucas who was across from me.

“Clive Graves. Wind attribute augmenter specializing in long-distance fighting with a bow. I don’t really have a weakness,” he said tersely.

“Lucas Wykes. I am a conjurer with a single specialization in fire. As for strengths and weaknesses, let’s not bother going over that.” Rolling his eyes, he just leaned back as he sat cross-legged.

Sensing the hostility in the air, I noticed Tess looking a little uncomfortable. “Tessia Eralith. I am a conjurer with a dual specialization in wood and wind. My strong suits are middle-to-close-range fighting...” Letting her voice trail off, our group became silent, as we all knew what the next topic would be.

"I elect myself to be the leader." Lucas was the first one to speak.

"Oh? By what standards do you see yourself as the leader of this group?" I tilted my head, giving him an innocent look.

"By strength of course. Let's be real... I can beat any of you guys in a fight. Isn't it natural for the strongest one to be the leader?" Lucas shot back, looking back at me incredulously.

"I vote for Tessia! She's the only girl and is pretty, so I like that. We can even name our team the Queen and Knights!" Roland had this sparkle in his eyes as his mind wandered off into his own little fantasy land.

"I also think that Princess Tessia should be the leader, ahem... not for the same reason of course, not saying that she isn't pretty but I mean... Since she is the Student Council President." Clive ended up looking down as he mumbled, his flushed cheeks looking unnatural on his serious face.

"Wait I don't want to be the leader! How about Art...thur? Arthur Leywin," she voiced, shaking her hands in defense.

"I also think that Tessia should be the leader." I raised my hand up as everyone ignored her comment. I didn't mind just as long as Lucas wasn't the one leading.

"Tch. Idiots." Lucas just rolled his eyes once more before we all got up.

"All right, since it seems like everyone is done, let's head in. Brace yourselves once we get inside, it's going to be chilly!" Professor Glory announced before stepping inside the entrance, which appeared to be a narrow stairway leading into darkness.

In a single file line, we all started making our way down the stairs and I could swear that the temperature dropped noticeably with every step we took.

"W-W-W-What the hell? W-W-W-Why is it s-s-s-so c-cold?" Roland managed to say in between his chattering teeth.

"Augment yourself, you dolt." I heard Clive's voiced from behind. It was really dark so I couldn't really see anything more than the vague outline of each person.

As we walked down the stairs, I felt something grip my wrist but before I pulled away, I realized what it was. Looking back, just a step behind me, I could see the vague outline of Tess' head. Even without seeing, I could tell she was already blushing by how warm her hand was. Passing off her gesture as a result of feeling scared, we walked silently down the seemingly endless flight of stairs.

Even without augmenting myself, the frigid temperatures in the dungeon was bearable due to my assimilated body, but as the dungeon got brighter, that soon changed. A gust of piercing cold air blew through the opening at the end of the tunnel, forcing me to shield myself with the shawl. As my eyes adjusted to the change in lighting, I couldn't help but become excited, seeing the first floor of the Widow's Crypt.

The cavern stretched out for hundreds of yards, making me wonder how it even supported itself. The stone that made up the large cavern sparkled with a dim blue light as a thin layer of ice covered the floor

and even formed icicles on the ceiling. Looking closely, I could see the nearly transparent layer of moss that covered the cavern walls and ceiling, enveloping this floor in a serene light.

“That’s odd, usually, we’d see a fair amount of snarlers already. Why don’t I—”

All of a sudden, hideous noises began echoing all around us. Peeking out from behind the numerous boulders and from small caverns spotted around the walls of the cave were an uncountable amount of beady red eyes.

“Th-That’s a lot of snarlers...” I could hear Roland gulp as his eyes widened. It wasn’t just him that was shocked at the sight but everyone in the class. Even Curtis and Claire looked. I looked at Professor Glory and from her expression, I didn’t think she anticipated seeing this many snarlers either.

The Beginning After The End – Chapter 66: Widow’s Crypt II

Even amongst mana beasts, snarlers were hideous creatures. With a thick grey fur coat, their 140cm bodies looked like muscular mini gorillas. Their faces, though, were a mix of a boar’s snout and tusks with beady red eyes and long ears. With their thick and powerful protruding jaw, you wouldn’t think they were only E stage mana beasts upon first glance.

“GRRRRRRRR”

“SSNNNNRRRKKK”

“GRAAHHK! GRAAHHK!”

As dozens and dozens revealed themselves from hiding, the snarlers started snapping their jaws while letting out low growls.

“P-Professor... are there supposed to be this many s-s-s-snarlers?” one of upperclassman females in the other group stammered out.

“This is so odd. Even in the lower floors, there are never this many snarlers bunched together.” Professor Glory braced herself and stayed firm. Because of the low morale in our class, if even our professor took a step back in hesitation, everyone would panic.

“There are a lot of them but they aren’t impossible to handle. However, since this is just a class excursion, I think it’s best to go back up, just in case. Safety is priority right now.” Just as Professor Glory started slowly ushering everyone back towards the stairs, a fireball flew past her and exploded in a crowd of snarlers.

As the fireball exploded, six snarlers all shot out in different directions and lay motionless.

“See? These nasty little beasts are weak. Professor, don’t tell me you brought us all here just to go back? Even a small fire spell was enough to kill six of them,” Lucas scoffed as he lowered his staff.

I could tell Professor Glory was still hesitant because of the unusual amount of snarlers suddenly appearing on the first floor.

“I-I think we should try and train here, Professor.” Curtis had a determined look on his face as several other students, because of Lucas’ display, gained confidence as well.



The snarlers that have all come out seemed a bit frightened now, as they warily keep their distance, studying us with their unintelligent eyes.

“Okay, but if I feel that something isn’t right, we’re immediately out of here, understood?” With a stern voice, she waited for the class to agree to her condition.

When she received a round of nods, she said, “Good. Split into your teams and take different parts of the floor. We don’t want any friendly fire happening in here. And Lucas, if you do something like that again, there will be consequences.” Professor Glory shot a menacing look towards the c\*\*\*y blond, making him reluctantly comply.

“Prince Curtis, take your team and make your way towards the left side of the cave. Princess Tessia, take your team to the right of the cave and hold your ground. The last team, with me. I’ll be keeping an eye on you guys at all times but stay vigilant and don’t underestimate the snarlers, especially in these numbers.” With that, Professor Glory motioned for the two teams to rush forward.

“Arthur, I want you to be the vanguard since you’re the best at close range. Clive and Roland, you guys take positions to his left and right behind him and make sure he’s covered. Lucas, stay in the center between Arthur, Clive and Roland; I’ll cover your back. We’re going in the diamond position we learned in class!” As soon as we headed towards the miniature army of snarlers, Tess’ shy self all but disappeared as her student president side took over.

“GRRRAHHKK!!”

“KHHRRAAA! KRRAAH!”

“Oh f\*\*k, f\*\*k, f\*\*k.” Roland, obviously intimidated by the fifty-odd snarlers all snapping their jaws at us, took out his weapon, which just looked like a handle of a sword.

Clive also took out his metal short bow from his dimension ring and drew it back. Where the arrow should have been was a long metal needle wrapped in gusts of wind.

I take out Dawn’s Ballad as well, which was still wrapped in white cloth. I left it sheathed and lowered myself, getting ready for a quick draw in case any of them suddenly jumped.

“Spread and destroy! Ember wisp!” As we approached the horde of snarlers, Lucas released one of his favorite spells that soon started floating around us.

“CRRAAHK!!” Reaching just 5 meters from the horde, I tucked my sword in tightly to my waist and prepared to draw as more than ten of them jumped towards us.

Dashing even faster, I leaned forward even lower and augmented the sword still inside its sheath. Augmenting a wind to accumulate inside, I had to use all of my strength to keep my blade from coming out of its sheath until the last minute. With the same theory as a loaded spring, I waited until I was just in front of the airborne snarlers before I released the pressurized blade.

As the speed of my blade broke the sound barrier with a loud boom!, I winced in pain as I felt my shoulder dislocating. That skill worked a lot better than I thought it would...I really shouldn’t experiment with skills in actual battles.

The front line of the snarlers both in the air and on the ground was either knocked back or cut in half but I couldn't follow up with anything as my right arm dangled, dropping my sword.

"GRHHAAK!" Several more snarlers took the place of the fallen and galloped towards me, using all four limbs now.

Several arrows whizzed by me and promptly impaled some of the snarlers that almost reached me.

I look back and gave Clive a nod before picking up my sword with my left hand. As I looked to my left, Roland was wielding a whip made of water as he gripped the handle he brought out in the beginning. The water whip whirled erratically as some attacks missed the target by a large margin, making me think that Roland was still learning his family's art.

The cave glowed in red and blue as different fire spells went off from both our side and the other teams' sides. The snarlers were trying to surround us as they began spreading out and keeping their distance. The ember wisps that Lucas summoned were still shooting off small streams of fire but the snarlers were getting crafty, throwing chunks of ice from the ground at the wisps in hopes of extinguishing them.

Tess spotted me clutching my arm as she's fought off two snarlers. "Arthur, are you okay?"

"Um... I think I'll be fine." I gritted my teeth and positioned my right arm between my legs as I prepared to pop the shoulder back in.

"Gah!" I couldn't help letting out a cry as I forcibly repositioned my arm in place.

The skill I hadn't even named yet worked a lot better than I thought, managing to kill over fifteen snarlers at once. Too bad my body wasn't able to withstand the force just now.

The snarlers weren't very strong, but after about thirty minutes the seemingly endless numbers that never dwindled were taking its toll on us. Clive and Roland were sweating profusely while Tess turned a bit pale. Even Lucas' spells were becoming a lot less flamboyant as he had to keep in mind the limit of his mana pool now.

"Is it just me or are there more snarlers now than there were in the beginning?" Roland shouted as he managed to kill three snarlers with the help of Clive.

"I think you're right. The numbers aren't adding up." Clive responded as he looked at Tess for further instructions.

Between the corpses on the floor and the ones still kicking, the numbers, just on our side, added up to roughly over one hundred. That was more than double from the beginning.

"I think we should head back over to Professor Glory. We're not going to be able to keep fighting like this for much longer," Tess announced. As we made our way slowly back to where the entrance to the dungeon was, it seemed like the other team had the same idea.

Professor Glory noticed all the teams coming towards her so she made her way to us, cleaving snarlers left and right with her sword.

"Professor, I don't think we can keep going like this. The snarlers keep coming!" Tess shouted over the waves of snarlers.

“Teams! Follow your leaders! We’re going back up!” Without hesitation, Professor Glory motioned for us to head back up the stairs when we hear a loud crash.

The icicles and stalactites, along with other rubble from the roof of the cave came crashing to the ground as two figures came floating down, flapping their large wings to hold themselves steady.

“Are you kidding me? What are the queen snarlers doing on this floor?” Professor Glory didn’t bother holding in her rage as she took out another giant sword from her dimension ring.

“Class, make sure to not let any of the minion snarlers get in my way. I’ll handle the two queens. I don’t know what’s going on but I’m getting you guys out of here if it’s the last thing I do.” With a click of her tongue, she pulled something from around her neck and threw it on the ground. As the necklace shimmered and then turned grey, the mana fluctuating around Professor Glory changed.

She was using a seal!

“Prepare to back up Professor Glory! Don’t let any of the snarlers get past us!” Tess commanded as she held her bladed staff out in front of her.

“Aye! Vanguard, protect the conjurers!” Curtis stepped up, brandishing his sword and shield.

I took a step forward too, gripping my sword with both hands to support my throbbing shoulder. There were ten of us in the front as Lucas, Tess and three other girls started chanting spells. My eyes couldn’t help but focus on Professor Glory as she wielded two giant swords, one in each hand. Fire and what looked like sand rapidly circled around her two swords as Professor Glory chanted inaudibly.

The fire and sand began intertwining as the two queen snarlers, both a few times larger and nastier, with wings, began cautiously surrounding Professor Glory. The queen snarlers’ front two limbs had four long, sharp claws that glistened in a coating that I assumed was poison.

“HAAAHP!” Professor Glory, her two giant swords ablaze with fire and sand, charged towards the smaller queen snarler, beginning the battle.

I held back on using spells, choosing to simply hack and slash my way against the snarlers by augmenting my sword. Their thick coat offered them a little resistance against spells and attacks but it didn’t take much to kill them. What became more of a problem was the corpses of the snarlers. Their dead bodies began piling more and more around us, getting in the way of our attacks. Looking around, I was relieved to see that the vanguards were still holding up. Both Curtis and Claire had minor scratches and bruises, but they were in much better shape compared to the other students.

I took a glance back and what I saw caught me by surprise. Professor Glory was pushing the queens, who were estimated to be on the upper spectrum of B-class bosses, back, by herself. What surprised me more was the way she did it. She was obviously a dual elemental augmenter in earth and fire, but she was producing projectiles that looked like ice shards...

No... looking carefully, it wasn’t ice. It was glass!

A small scratch on my arm brought my attention back to the fight in front of me but my mind couldn’t ponder how Professor Glory was able to do that. I knew about superheating sand but in order to produce that amount of heat while still battling...

“KRRRAAAAAAHHHH!” The ear-deafening cry made us turn our heads back. Professor Glory just managed to land the finishing blow on the smaller queen. Our Professor wasn’t in the best of shape, her armor scratched and dented in various places while blood trickled down her cheeks.

“All right!”

“NICE!!”

“Go Professor!”

The defeat of one of the queens dramatically boosted the morale of the class as each of the students’ renewed vigor allowed us to fight back harder against the snarlers that seemed to generate spontaneously.

“GRRRRRAAAAAHH!!!”

Upon seconds of hearing a loud crash, Professor Glory flew past the front line and landed hard against a wave of minion snarlers.

Allowing myself a few seconds to look back, a wave of nausea hit me as my eyes glued onto the sight of the bigger queen snarler, gorging on the corpse of the fallen queen.

The Beginning After The End – Chapter 67: Widow’s Crypt III

As the larger queen began devouring the smaller one, I couldn’t help but become perplexed by what was happening in this dungeon. There were more than ten floors here, with minion snarlers inhabiting all but the tenth floor, where the queen snarler dwelled. The reason this dungeon was considered a beginner dungeon was because the queen never left the tenth floor, allowing for easy training up until the very last floor.

Although the queen snarler was a B class mana beast, a large party of E class adventurers was still capable of defeating it.

Which brought another question to mind: Was it normal to have more than one queen in the dungeon? From what I had read, queen species were very territorial, and aggressive to any potential competitors that threatened their den.

Professor Glory didn’t really think much of it but I couldn’t help but be bothered by it. This brought me to my last inquiry. How were those two queens so much stronger than they normally should be?

I could understand Professor Glory having a hard time against two B class mana beasts that were considered dungeon bosses, but she shouldn’t be losing. An A-class adventurer was supposed to easily dispose of the kind of queen snarler I had read about.

“Why is that one so much stronger?” Professor Glory got up as she groaned, cleaving a few minions out of her way.

As I fended off waves of snarlers, my attention kept on drawing back to the queen snarler eating its former ally.

“Professor, does this usually happen?” I asked.

“Well, I’ve heard that some species of mana beasts do indulge in cannibalism but I’ve never really seen this particular case. Why now of all times, I have no idea.” Shaking her head, she picked up her other sword and made her way towards her opponent.

As the queen snarler finished consuming her fallen comrade, a bizarre change occurred. Its once grey fur turned jet black and the small horn on its forehead that I failed to notice at first curved upwards, growing substantially. The once beady red eyes turned sharp and menacing—almost psychotic—as it began foaming from its mouth as well.

Professor Glory didn’t say anything but I knew that there was a growing sense of doubt in her mind as the beast charged at her. Until now, getting back home safely was considered just a matter of time, but even I couldn’t help but shiver involuntarily from the murderous intent that exuded from the queen.

“Professor! We can’t... keep this up!” Tess shouted hoarsely amidst the growls and hisses of the enemy.

Her condition didn’t look too good and brought to my attention a rather obvious problem we were now facing.

“Everyone! No more fire spells! The entrance of the cave is blocked so our supply of oxygen is limited!” I roared out.

From the burnt pile of corpses accumulating, the air was becoming thick as some of the weaker students began coughing uncontrollably.

The queen and Professor Glory were at a stalemate, with our professor drifting towards the losing side. As I focused on the main battle, I could see that the fighting style of the queen snarler had completely changed. There was no trace of hesitation or sense of self-preservation. Each attack it lashed out at Professor Glory was with the intent to kill without caring for its own body. Usually that should’ve been its downfall, but that unique queen snarler’s black fur was able to absorb most of the damage from our professor’s attacks.

“Arthur... I think... my mana core is beginning to... act up.” Tess, who was a few meters behind me, fell to her knees as she began clutching her abdomen.

D\*\*n it.

‘Papa! What’s wrong? Are you okay?’ Sylvie’s voice popped in my head.

We ran into a problem, get here as fast as you can and head down the stairs, I responded before focusing back on what was happening here.

Several factors began weighing down on my mind now and I began to feel a sense of nostalgia from my trip to the Dire Tombs. Did I have the power to clear the mountain of rubble blocking the front entrance to the stairs? And even if I did, should I just take Tess and escape by ourselves?

No. Tess would never forgive me if she knew that I left everyone else in here to escape.

Then after opening a way back up, should I stay behind and help Professor Glory kill the mutated queen snarler?

Whatever decision I chose to make, the first thing I had to do was remove this rubble. It was important that I cleared a path back up in one try, since it was obvious the queen wasn't going to let us all escape.

"Professor, keep the queen busy. I'll try to open a way out of here for us!" Professor Glory had to work even harder to keep up with the queen since she couldn't use any fire techniques. After giving me a nod of affirmation, I got to work. Tess wasn't in any state to help and everyone else was too busy fending off the army of minion snarlers. Lucas had to resort to using heat spells to try and deter the snarlers since oxygen levels were becoming more and more scarce.

I would have to do this by myself. I had to calculate this well. If I were to use a large enough fire spell in this state right now and fail, we were all going to suffocate in here. Water? Ice? There were too little water elemental mana particles in this cave to release anything strong enough to drill a hole through the mountain of rock. The once ice-filled cave was now dry and arid with a thick layer of smoke being produced from some of the burnt snarler corpses.

That left me with wind and earth, or a mixture of both, but even with the level I was right now, I wasn't confident in being able to produce a powerful enough attack. I thought of maybe using phase two, but with Tess in the condition she was in right now, I had to stay conscious, at least until we got out of this dungeon.

Was there really no other option? As my mind began spinning for possible solutions, I saw Professor Glory receive a pretty large blow to her right arm.

'I'm almost there, Papa! Hold on!' Sylvie's voice gave me an idea.

That's it!

"Curtis! I need your help right now!" I roared across the battlefield.

"Arthur, I don't think I can afford to—"

"Come, now!" I barked back before he could refute.

Curtis was a b\*\*\*\*y, grimy mess, but from the shallow wounds on his body, it was obvious that the blood on him wasn't his.

"What is it?" He panted heavily. I could tell he was exhausted by the wear on his face and body. His shield was badly dented and his sword was slick with blood, dulled from repeated use.

"Do you think your beast will ability, World Howl, is strong enough to clear the rubble?" I turned his head to snap him back to attention.

"Arthur, I don't think I have the mana to even go into my first phase." He shook his head hopelessly.

"Just answer the question. Is it strong enough?"

"Y-Yeah, if I had enough mana, I could potentially produce a blast bigger than the one in the mock team battle where you, um, got injured." He scratched his head, confused by where I was going with this.

I thought about maybe directing the blast at the queen snarler but even if it were strong enough to kill it, it would be impossible to accurately catch only the queen and not Professor Glory. It was safer to just go with this plan.

“Okay. I want you to not question what I’m about to do. Just focus on going into your first phase and producing a blast strong enough to clear that mountain of rubble. Got it?” The amount of urgency and authority must have gotten through to Curtis because he just nodded and turned around.

Taking off my seal and putting it in my dimension ring, I made sure to control the amount fluctuation in the mana as to not tip anyone off. Everyone was occupied with the snarlers but if I didn’t control the mana release like Professor Glory did after she released her seal, I would draw attention from the queen snarler.

Feeling the untapped pool of mana that I now had access to, I placed both my hands on Curtis’ back.

From the amount of mana I willed into Curtis, the prince involuntarily dropped to one knee before he was able to adjust his body to the sudden bombardment of mana.

Mana transference had been studied for many years according to professors and many of the books in the library, but it was a hopeless cause for them. They believed that if a mage had the fire attribute, receiving mana from another fire attribute mage should be possible, but after countless tests and failures, they deemed it implausible; the reason being that even if someone was specialized, the mana inside their bodies weren’t purely of just that element. Hypothetically, if someone was able to condense and refine their core to the highest sense, then they could transfer mana with another person core of that same level and element. Other than that, it would be impossible. Except for me.

The fact that I was able to manipulate all four elements allowed me to adjust and mimic and input the types of mana and the ratio of each element of the person I was transferring to. It was sort of like what I did for my sister and Lilia when teaching them mana manipulation in their bodies but on a much bigger scale. Of course I hadn’t perfectly mastered this so it was inevitable that I’d be wasting a lot of mana, but this was our best bet.

As I began slowly controlling and limiting the amount of each elemental mana particles I transmitted to Curtis, I couldn’t help but grit my teeth in self-deprecation at the turn of events.

There were so many small signs that I chose to ignore, thinking that it would work out fine, and that I could handle it. Was I treating this life I had right now for granted? Being fortunate enough to have this amount of power at my age definitely made me lose my past sense of rationality to a degree.

No longer a king, tied down by rules and politics as well as my own physical capabilities, I’d become careless. In this world, the limits to my potential were boundless. Reaching white stage or even further wasn’t a dream but a matter of time and effort.

The thing that appalled me the most and what I hated to admit was that I was, in a sense, a bit like Lucas. I was nowhere near as much of a jerk as him and I had people I actually cared for besides myself, but I was becoming arrogant; arrogant to the extent of carelessness.

"I-I don't know what you just did, Arthur, but I feel great. I think I'll be able to go into my first phase!" the prince exclaimed, bringing me back to reality. I sensed the change his body was going through as he began to transition into his first phase.

Mana fluctuated erratically around him as he released his beast will. I jerked my hands back in pain as Curtis released his first phase. Confused, I tried transferring mana to him again but the rejection from his body was even stronger than the first time.

Did the mana from his beast will reject my mana?

Before I had the chance to try again, Curtis began gathering mana for his World Howl technique.

He crouched, lowering his center of gravity to withstand the recoil of the spell, the mana from both his body and the atmosphere gathered in front of his open jaw.

During this time, I rushed to where Tess was curled behind the front line and scooped her up. Getting Tess out of here was first priority. I was partly to blame for this mess. I should've done a better job in preventing something like this from happening in the first place.

With a beastly roar, Curtis unleashed his powerful breath attack, but the mutated queen must've sensed that something was wrong because it immediately changed its target from the wounded Professor Glory to Curtis.

"Oh no you don't!" Bellowing at the top of her lungs, Professor Glory leaped up and grappled the mutated queen in flight, hoping to deter it from reaching Curtis.

With a thundering explosion, Curtis' spell blasted a large hole through the rubble, clearing a path to the now visible stairway entrance back to the surface.

"Everyone, head to the stairs!" I roared through the sound of rocks falling and snarlers growling.

"Go now!" Professor Glory shouted as well as she struggled to hold her own against the queen snarler.

The exhausted class made one final push towards the entrance as Professor Glory held the queen at bay, the wall of snarler corpses obstructing the ones alive for a brief moment.

"Claire, I'm trusting Tess to you." I handed Tess to Claire, who seemed to be in the best shape right now.

"You're not planning on staying, are you? You can't be serious. As your commanding leader in the disciplinary committee, I forbid—"

"Just go..." With the limited amount of time we had, I released a sharp killing intent to get my point across, making her flinch backwards in surprise.

Helping the drained Curtis back to his feet, I pushed both of my disciplinary committee teammates toward the front entrance of the cave before turning back to where Professor Glory was fighting.

"Why the hell did you come back, Arthur?!" I could almost feel the amount of frustration in my professor's voice as she snapped at me through gritted teeth.

"We're going to need both of us to kill this thing." Taking Dawn's Ballad back out from my dimension ring, I unsheathed it.



“You better hope this thing kills me because you’re going to regret not following my orders,” she responded, blocking a blow from the queen’s sharp claws.

“Hey, I’m a professor too, remember?” I gave her a weary smile before making a sharp swing with my blade.

“You’re too smart for your own good, Arthur.” She smiled back while shaking her head. The situation didn’t seem too good as the mana transference had made me use most of my mana. If it weren’t for mana rotation, I probably would’ve gotten backlash already.

While battling the queen and keeping her busy enough so the rest of the class could get out safely, I noticed that the last one here was Lucas. Our eyes locked for a brief moment before he turned his head back and disappeared into the entrance.

I could’ve sworn I saw him snort before he turned away.

As the fight continued, I managed to sever one of the queen’s wings so it wasn’t capable of flight any longer, but its thick fur was preventing us from doing anything more than giving it shallow wounds. This mutated queen, standing almost ten feet tall on its hind legs, was filled with wounds from both Professor Glory and I, but it didn’t seem to bother it at all.

“I don’t think we can kill this thing!” I shouted to Professor Glory, who was on the other side of the queen snarler.

“We’ll need to at least bind it somehow so we can escape. I don’t think the queen will follow us out of the dungeon!” she responded as the queen howled in anger.

“I need you to keep it busy for five seconds, Professor.” I repositioned myself so Professor Glory was in view.

“Okay.” She didn’t question what I was about to do as she unleashed another burst of mana out of her core.

As Professor Glory leaped toward the mutated queen, I put my sheath back into my dimension ring and grasped my sword with both hands. With the seal gone, I used the last of my mana to will lightning into Dawn’s Ballad.

Without mana to strengthen and empower my movement, my dash toward the queen snarler felt like a crawl.

“Move!” At my signal, Professor Glory leaped out of the way as I stabbed my sword into an already existing wound that I had managed to inflict just earlier between its shoulder blades.

The crackle of electricity prying its way in through the seam caused the queen to erupt into a high-pitched shriek as she began to spasm.

“Let’s go!” Without even being able to pull my sword back out from the queen snarler, Professor Glory grabbed me by my waist and carried me toward the front entrance.

As the hordes of minions got in our way, Professor Glory slashed through until we reached the front entrance.

Suddenly, a dark shadow passed over us. “H-How?” Professor Glory could only gasp as both of us looked up. The queen, with my sword still embedded in its spine, somehow recovered enough to make one desperate leap to keep us from escaping.

“Hurry!” I was currently dangling on top of my professor’s shoulder as I tried to snap her out of her shock. With the mutated queen snarler almost upon us, we barely managed to avoid its sharp claws before she landed hard on the ground.

Without the luxury to even look back, we made our way past the minions and into the hall when I spotted the mutated queen crawling her way toward us. I guess my last attack did some damage because it wasn’t freely mobile—instead, it awkwardly limped toward us, using its claws to drag its body.

Reaching the end of the hall where the stairs began to ascend, I noticed something odd about the queen snarler that was just a couple meters away from us.

Every bit of that mutated queen was odd, but this was different. As it reached closer and closer to the top of the staircase, where we were, its face and body began pulsating. Tumors began growing sporadically in random parts of its body and face.

Don’t tell me...

Before I was even able to finish my thought, the queen burst apart in an explosion of guts, blood, and shards of exoskeleton.

Before Professor Glory could even turn around, the force of the explosion pushed her forward, and she lost her grip on me.

As if that wasn’t bad enough, the explosion caused by the queen opened up a large hole beneath it.

“Arthur!” Through gritted teeth, I heard my professor’s desperate cry as she reached her hand out for me, but it was too late. I could feel myself growing weaker from the force of the queen’s last desperate attempt.

“Save Tess!” I called back out weakly before using the last bit of mana I’d been gathering for the short amount of time to augment my body.

The Beginning After The End – Chapter 68: Widow’s Crypt IV

After what seemed like hours of falling while being knocked between various rocks that fell along with me from the explosion, I spread my arms and legs, desperately trying to find anything to grab to stop myself from becoming a splatter mark on the ground. The speed at which I was dropping kept me from stabilizing myself on my own, but fortunately, my right hand was able to latch onto a jutted tree root. Unfortunately, that was also the arm that had been dislocated not too long ago so the sudden jolt sent a sharp pain up my arm that made me wish I’d just fallen flat on the ground instead.

Dangling helplessly by my right arm that felt as if it were going to rip off at any moment, I desperately sent Sylvie a mental transmission.

Sylv. Are you there? I fell quite a bit away but I’m still okay. Do you sense where I am?

I waited for a minute but there was no response—I couldn't even sense my bond. I immediately began worrying that something had happened to her, but with the queen snarler dead and the rest trapped inside the dungeon, it was unlikely. It was more reasonable to conclude that I was either too far down, or that this area was warded off and sealed from the outside, or more accurately, the surface.

By the extent of my drop, I doubted I was on any of the immediate floors below it, causing me to wonder if the explosion had unveiled a hidden passage to some room somewhere inside the dungeon.

Thinking back on the explosion caused by the mutated queen snarler, I couldn't help but think how odd it had been. The blast was large, but I got the feeling that the explosion wasn't meant to kill whoever was near it. If that were the case, my body, along with Professor Glory's, would be in a much worse state than it was now.

"Ugh," I groaned as I continued hanging off my limp arm, feeling myself lose grip. I let out a couple quick breaths to ready myself before I used the remaining strength in my right arm to pull myself up just enough for my left arm to take its place.

Through gritted teeth, I resisted the temptation to just let go and leave it up to God or the gods or any gods, whatever they worshiped in this world, if any.

After a quick assessment of my body's condition, which was in fairly good shape besides my right shoulder, I tried to survey my surroundings, except all I could see was darkness. It wasn't as simple as it simply being dark; it was pitch black. That feeling of when you shut your eyes so hard that it seems like different lights were oozing around in your vision or that feeling where no matter how hard you squinted, your eyes couldn't adjust—that was what I was feeling right now.

As I activated my mana rotation, I dispersed the mana I had covering my body to only my left arm. I had to use this "break time" to gather as much mana I could. Augmenting what little mana I had into my eyes in hopes to see something, I was rewarded with only darkness.

I'm not blind... am I? I couldn't help but think to myself as I augmented my eyes again.

Just to comfort my needless worry, I break one of the most basic rules in situations like this. I produced a small fire on the tip of my right index finger.

Looking at the warm red and orange flicker of fire on my fingertip, I breathed in relief before extinguishing the flame.

While vision was an important thing, the last thing I wanted to do in a dark place like this was draw attention to myself. Now that the enemies here, if any, knew of my location, I needed to move.

Since I couldn't see, I used wind to sense the type of space I was in right now. I had no idea how narrow or wide this hole that I was in was, but I assumed it wasn't too wide since I hit quite a few objects along the way while falling.

Sending out short, soft bursts of wind, equidistant, around me, I figure out that this ditch, for a lack of better words, had a diameter of about 10 meters. The scary part, however, was that I couldn't even sense how far down I was and how much further I had to go down until I had a floor to walk on.

What I had to decide now was whether to try and climb back up or make my way down. By how much I fell and all of the other debris that fell down along with me, chances were that the opening at the top would already be covered. With Sylvie not answering from outside, I had no way of knowing if she could open up an exit for me.

That only leaves me with going down.

I sighed.

No matter how rational and level headed I was, I couldn't help but feel a bit anxious in this situation. More so than the immediate dangers in front of me, a situation like this, where I couldn't see anything or even sense any life forms, made me more edgy. In the case where the army of snarlers was in front of us, I knew what I had to do and I could think of how to deal with it. Right now, I could neither imagine nor predict what might happen in the next couple of seconds, making me all the more tense.

Augmenting both my hands with earth attribute mana, I'm able to bury my hand into the side of the giant abyss-like hole, creating a handhold for myself. I positioned myself flat against the side with both my hands dug into the wall to keep myself from falling.

In a steady motion, I pulled my augmented hands out of the side of the wall and allow myself to fall before I clawed my hands into the wall again to stop. The amount of stress it put on my arms made me cringe every time but this would be the fastest way to make my way down.

Gripping, letting go, gripping, letting go, gripping, letting go. I had to keep my body flat so I don't start falling away from the wall. I also couldn't wait too long before I had to grip the wall again because it would be a lot more dangerous to try and slow down after picking up too much speed.

I let out pulses of wind every now and then to try and see how much farther I had to go down. Even after around 3 hours of gripping and letting go, according to my internal clock, I had yet to sense a floor anywhere close beneath me.

How deep is this f\*\*\*\*\*g hole? Without even the luxury to vent my frustration aloud, I was left to rant inside my head using words even the most vulgar of adults would find inappropriate.

I knew that everyone warned adventurers about the dangers and unpredictability of dungeons but both the Dire Tombs and even this supposedly low-level dungeon had proven to cause me more trouble than the times I adventured with Jasmine without the use of magic.

I mean, what were the chances that the one time I go to a D class dungeon supposedly filled with E class monsters, a freaking army decides to welcome us on the first floor?

The minion snarlers hadn't even been that bad, to be honest. We were stupid for using so much fire magic when we had no ventilation but I had handled most of them without even using mana.

That mutated queen had been the problem. How the hell did she get so strong? Was it because she ate the other queen? Was it even possible to just get instant power-ups like that?

As I continued debriefing to myself the events that occurred earlier, I kept gripping and letting go of the stone wall, falling down further into who knows where I was now.

I let go of the wall and fell down, timing myself before burying my augmented hands into the wall again. However, unlike before, my hand wouldn't go inside.

"What the..."

I desperately tried clawing at the wall but even with the augmentation in my hand, I wasn't able to make even a scratch into the wall.

The surface of the wall was different now. It was smooth—too smooth to be natural.

I was picking up speed as I persistently tried to bury my fingers into the wall, hopelessly.

This isn't working.

Careful to make as little noise as possible while I continued falling, I rhythmically let out pulses of wind around me, as a sort of makeshift echolocation. Through sending out faint pulses and measuring how long it took before it hit a surface, I could locate, in my head, potential footholds and handholds to make my way down.

Easier said than done. The theory worked great in my head but trying it without practice proved harder than I imagined. There were few handholds I could try and hang myself from but my makeshift echolocation technique wasn't as accurate as I wished it would be.

I ended up narrowly missing a lot of the potential supports and it just became harder as I picked up speed.

Fortunately, I still didn't sense the floor anywhere close to me so I had time, but if I fell down any faster, even if I could grab onto a support, I wasn't sure if my arms would be able to take the stress from the abrupt stop.

As I continue fumbling my arms against the wall to search for anything that may slow down or stop my fall, I was finally able to sense the ground.

D\*\*n it... This isn't good.

I had about 200 meters before my body became a puddle on the ground. That left me with about... six seconds?

D\*\*n it all.

Turning around so that the wall was to my back, I gathered all the mana I saved up 'til now. It would take about 4 seconds to focus enough mana into the spell.

Wind Bullet. Stretching my arms out in front of me, I unleash a barrage of fist-sized bullets of compressed air to the other side of this giant hole I was in.

If I could create enough force to push myself back against the wall, I would be able to slow down enough to survive the fall. I no longer cared about keeping noise to a minimum.

The air bullets boomed as they collided into the wall about 10 meters away from me, My body pressed harder and harder against the wall behind me from the recoil of the spell, and I couldn't do anything besides grit my teeth as I felt the back of my uniform and my skin burning off due to the friction.

I could feel myself approaching the backlash stage but I just desperately let out all of the mana I could muster up while using mana rotation. As the air bullets continued colliding against the other side, pushing me back harder and harder into the smooth wall, I approached the ground.

50 meters...

40 meters...

20 meters...

I see a faint light!

10 meters...

5 meters...

“AAHH!!” I felt myself slowing down as the burning pain coursing through my back became numb.

Two meters before I reached the ground. I let out one last, large pulse of compressed air straight below me.

My eyes bulged and the only sound I could make was a painful cough as I met the ground, a jolt shooting straight up my body.

I rolled forward as soon as I could, trying to spread out the pressure as much as possible, but it wasn't enough.

Head spinning, I struggled to stay conscious as my vision blurred.

My vision!

As I lifted my head up from the ground, faint lights illuminated the area, allowing my blurring vision to get a sense of where I was. I seemed to be in a passageway of some sort, with small lights along the sides. Further down the hall came a brighter source of light.

“Wh-Who's there?” a female voice echoed.

When I open my mouth, only coughs came out.

I tried answering the frightened voice but again, my voice failed me.

“Please... I need help,” she murmured.

Again, nothing came out as my vision continued to fade in and out. I tried getting up but utterly failed.

“...Hold....on.” My voice came out raspy and weak but she heard me.

I heard harsh, forced breaths from her before she replied with a weak, “Okay.”

Sylvia's dragon will was working wonders as I felt my body healing itself. My back was scorching from sliding down the wall and my legs felt like they'd been torn apart and taped back together, but I was able to stand up within thirty minutes.

Looking around to where I landed, I couldn't help but shake my head at the complete darkness that loomed above me from where I came from. Around me were shattered stones and, I think, a limb of the queen snarler that exploded. Near the limb though, my eyes noticed a reflection coming from under a pile of rubble.

Making my way there slowly, a smile crept up on my face as I realized what it was. My sword! Good old Dawn's Ballad was soon retrieved and safely back inside my dimension ring after digging it up and pulling it out of the shallow pile of rocks on top of it. I put the torn limb of the mutated queen snarler inside my dimension ring as well, hoping to study it if I ever made it back up.

Thinking optimistically, I realized I wasn't in too bad of a shape. I managed to slow myself down enough so I didn't have any broken bones. The shock went through the spine and rattled my brain, making me almost lose consciousness but considering the circumstances, I felt like it could've been a lot worse. My mana was now beginning to recover and with my legs functioning, I made my way to the voice that seemed to have gone silent.

"Hello?" I walked through the passageway, using the wall as support.

"I'm... here." The voice seemed even weaker than it had been half an hour ago.

Making my way towards the growing light at the end of the hall, I called out to her again.

As I reached the end of the tunnel, my vision took a few seconds to adjust from the change in brightness after being accustomed to utter darkness for so long.

"This... cough... way."

"..."

Before I could respond, I almost fell back as I stumbled in horror from what I witnessed.

The warzone created by the hundreds of snarler bodies scattered and piled on top of each other seemed like it was from a children's picture book compared to the scene that I couldn't seem to peel my eyes away from.

Corpses. Corpses of humans, elves, and dwarves lay dead and some in pieces around the cavern that would've been considered beautiful otherwise.

The once green grass-like moss spread over the ground was dyed red while the stream crossing through the cavern had floating bodies with blood spreading around them.

There were around forty-fifty corpses spread out in the cavern with their weapons next to them. The damage done to their bodies revealed torture as some had their limbs torn apart and others had cuts all over their beheaded bodies.

I heard her cough again. "Are you... still there?" The weak voice came from my left.

"I can't see... oh..." My heart dropped and I couldn't even finish.

The woman that was lying against the wall of the cavern was probably in a worse state than the carcasses spread around, split apart.

The woman, an elf, it seemed, had most of her limbs torn off. Where her right arm and both legs should've been were holes, cruelly sealed by burning the wounds. Her eyes were gone as dried blood that streamed down from where her eyes were stained her cheeks. In the woman's abdomen, right where her mana core was, a sleek black spike was impaled through her and once again, sealed.

"You... How?" I dropped to my knees in front of her as I inspected her. Looking at her carefully, I felt like I'd seen her somewhere. I couldn't quite put my finger on it but I recognized her face. Where did I...

The Six Lances... The Six Lances! She was one of the six strongest mages in all of Dicathen, chosen to represent the Continent.

"You're one of the six lances!" I couldn't help but sputter out.

"Indeed I am..." She let out a ragged sigh.

"As for how... If you're asking me how I'm still alive in this state, it's because he left me alive." Her eyebrows furrowed and the dried blood crusted in between her eyelids crumbled, letting out a faint stream of fresh blood from where her eyes once were.

"He?" I felt like I was asking stupid questions but I was so lost.

"Yes, he. He called himself Vritra." With her left hand, the only limb she had left, she slowly reached for something behind her and pulled it out.

Inside her hand was a sleek black stone fragment of some sort. As I squinted my eyes and analyzed it, I was suddenly reminded of my time with Sylvia.

As the memory clicked and the pieces were put together in my head, my hand squeezed tightly around the black shard as my whole body shook from anger.

I remembered why this black stone looked so familiar.

It was part of the horn of one of the black-horned demons that Sylvia first disguised herself as, and also the very species that killed her.

The Beginning After The End – Chapter 69: Widow's Crypt V

"Can I keep this?" I asked before realizing that my palm had been bleeding from grasping the shard of the horn too hard.

The elven woman, despite her condition, let out a hoarse chuckle after my question, catching me by surprise. Raising an eyebrow, I couldn't help but wonder what was going through her mind and how admirable she was for her ability to still laugh considering her situation.

"You're looking at me as if I've gone insane," she said as she struggled to turn her head toward the sound of my voice.

"No, not insane. Admirable, if anything," I replied.

"You're a weird one too, asking a dying soldier if you can keep something like that. Keep it. It won't hold any value to me anyway." She let out a sigh and suddenly, her face looked as if it had aged twenty years by the grave expression she wore.



"I don't even know your name, kid, but I'm going to die soon. There's no need to try and be sensitive about that fact." The elven warrior let out a ragged breath but her expression remained firm.

"My name is Arthur, and... yeah. Unfortunately, there doesn't seem to be any way for me to save you." I put the black shard inside my dimension ring. "I'm sorry."

"I guess it just wasn't meant to be then. Since I don't have a lot of time, I'll tell you as much as I know." My chest felt heavy as she so easily casted aside her hopes and accepted her fate.

"My name is Alea Triscan, as you figured out. I am one of the of the six lances and the corpses that you probably spotted upon your arrival were my troops. Each lance was in charge of a battalion composed of top mages." She let out another heavy sigh, and for once, I was glad she wasn't able to witness the gruesome slaughter that'd turned this once beautiful place into a grave of mangled corpses.

"After the commencement of the six lances a few months ago, I had been training them to work as a team to clear dungeons and other unknown areas. The six lances rarely go on missions together, unless we are to explore an S class dungeon or above," she continued after pausing for a gulp of air.

"From the direction of your footsteps earlier, it seemed you came in from a different entrance. This place is actually connected to three dungeons. Which dungeon did you come from, Arthur?" Alea wiggled her body, struggling to prop herself up against the wall.

"I came with my classmates and professor from the Widow's Crypt. Everyone else was able to make it back out, but I guess I wasn't so lucky." I took a seat against the wall next to Alea as I surveyed the carnage displayed before me. I was able to vaguely imagine what'd happened by how the bodies were positioned and where they had sustained their fatal injuries.

"I'm not sure how old you are, Arthur, but no one should have to see something like this," Alea whispered, her voice laced with remorse.

"My age probably won't correlate too well in regards to situations like this, but you are right. No one, regardless of age, should have to see something like this."

Her breathing became more ragged and sporadic but she held on.

"My troops and I came from an A class dungeon named Hell's Jaw. We were assigned to investigate the dungeon after getting reports of inconsistent sightings inside. The adventurers that had come back alive were ones who frequented the dungeon for training. The ones that made it back were barely alive and they all spoke about how the beasts residing within suddenly became stronger and fiercer. Was that the case for the dungeon you came from as well?" Alea asked, her words coming out slower than before.

"Yes. Just on the first floor, an army of minion snarlers welcomed us. The minions weren't bad but two queen snarlers showed up. One of the queens, after eating the other queen, turned from gray to black and its strength jumped a few fold. I suspected this was the cause."

"What do you mean you suspected?! Are you saying you've seen that demon before?" Alea's limp body suddenly sprang up as her head turned back toward me, shock evident in her voice.

"I'm not sure if it's the same one, but yes," I responded frankly.

“The same one? You think there’s more than one?” Alea’s already pale face drained to an even whiter color.

“I don’t have definite proof, but I suspect that the one you saw, Vritra, is just one of the horned demons out there somewhere,” I replied, recalling that night where I had gotten separated from Sylvia. The black demon with its horns curving downwards said something about causing them trouble. It was just speculation, but I suspected that there were probably more of them.

My mind began to spin as I pondered over the different possibilities and reasons as to why they were doing this. Was this all for Sylvie or some greater cause?

I remembered when Sylvia had given the stone to me that I had to protect it at all costs. That “stone” turned out to be an egg, and of a dragon no less. Was Sylvie such an important existence that the horned demons had to go this far for?

“What... are you thinking of, Arthur?” Alea let out a strained cough as fresh blood escaped from the sealed wound where her mana core once was.

I always found it intriguing that, while beast cores were capable of being harvested and used as tools to enhance mana, human mana cores weren’t. When a mage died, their mana core shattered and the mana accumulated inside dispersed. Was it because we gathered mana from the atmosphere that this happened?

There seemed to be a deeper meaning when I thought of how humans didn’t need their mana cores in order to survive, while our mana cores were dependent on us being alive. This world seemed to revolve around whether you were a mage or not, and if you were, how strong you were. I couldn’t help but think that the God of this world wanted to tell us that life was more important than magic, which should be an obvious statement, but a statement which the people of this world seemed to have forgotten.

Before I lost myself deeper into the aspect of a higher being, Alea’s ragged coughing snapped me back to reality.

“Are you okay?” That was a dumb question. Of course she isn’t okay.

“When my team reached the first floor of Hell’s Jaw, there was nothing off about it; the mana beasts were the same ones that were recorded. It was when we reached the final floor where the master of the dungeon made its den. The Hades Serpent, which was an AA class mana beast, should’ve been something I could’ve beaten myself fairly easily.” There was no trace of boasting or overconfidence in her tone. It was just a fact to her.

“The Hades Serpent, which was known for the blue fire spouting along its long spine, looked different. At first, we were confused because it didn’t look like it had any flames at all, but when we looked closer, the reason we couldn’t see the flames against the black walls of the cave was because the flames themselves were black.

“It looked like thick smoke flickering wildly along the spine of the hundred-foot serpent. That particular Hades Serpent also had a black horn jutting out of its forehead while its scales, which were recorded as being a matte grey color, were a sleek black...” Taking a deep breath, I noticed Alea shivering.

“The fight was gruesome. I lost five of my men to that Hades Serpent. The fight took several hours but I was able to kill it. When we tried to retrieve the beast core though, it wasn’t there.” She broke into another fit of coughs so I ran toward the pond and soaked what was left of my uniform inside. After rinsing it, I allowed the fabric to absorb as much water as it could before walking back to Alea.

“Open your mouth,” I instructed.

She hesitated for a moment but she eventually did as she was told. As I gently squeezed my soaked uniform over her mouth, the water trickled into her mouth.

She let out a small yelp in surprise at the cold liquid but soon after, began fiercely gulping down the water. She whispered a small thank you before continuing on with her story.

“Although we were tempted to go back to the surface, we hadn’t managed to figure anything out, so we started searching for clues inside. One of my men used a spell and found that there was a hidden tunnel underneath a thin layer of earth. After crossing the tunnel, we arrived here...” As Alea’s voice trembled at her last words, tears mixed with blood streamed down the closed eyelids where her eyes used to be.

“H-He was here...when we reached this cavern. I still remember the way he looked at us. Those scarlet eyes...” After letting out a trembling breath, she continued.

“My team and I... no one knew what that monster was so we did what our instincts told us to do. We raised our weapons.... that was our first mistake. I can still picture it so clearly. His pale gray skin. His face... it was beastly yet, it looked almost...human. He looked at us and smirked, exposing his sharp fangs. What threw us off was when he talked...” Her voice fell into a whisper.

“Mm,” I responded, just to let her know I was still there.

“He wasn’t even surprised to see us there. Vritra, he... that thing, just looked at us before...”

“Before?” I asked, sitting upright.

“He gave us two options.” Tears and blood continued to stream down her once beautiful face as she willed herself to finish.

“He looked straight at me, as if he knew instantly that I was the leader, and told me that he’d let me walk out unharmed if I—” she choked back a sob, her only hand clenched white into a fist, “—if I dismembered each of my teammates, one by one, in front of him.”

The ridiculous offer would’ve infuriated anyone but looking at the state Alea was in right now, I didn’t have the confidence to say she had made the right decision. Maybe her teammates would’ve wanted her to kill them quickly instead of being tortured the way they were.

“What was the other option?” I asked, gently wrapping my hands over her clenched fist.

“He just... scoffed at us and said ‘...or you can try and fight.’” Her blood-mixed tears stained the torn remains of her clothes as she continued to softly cry.

Unable to find the words to comfort her, I just kept my hands wrapped tightly around her fist. Moments trickled by with only the sound of running water and Alea’s silent s\*\*s breaking the deathly silence.

“We didn’t... stand a chance,” she whispered, hiccuping.

“I hate to make you relive the scene, but I need as much of the details as possible, Alea.” I gently stroked her hand to try and calm her.

“He had one horn in the middle of his forehead... that curved backwards sharply.” She tried her best to talk calmly.

“One horn?” So there really was more than one horned demon. Was it a clan? A race?

My heart began beating uncontrollably from just imagining a whole race composed of horned demons; just one of them could wipe out one of the six lances and her team.

“Y-Yes. My strongest single point attack only managed to create a small chip in that horn.” Alea seemed like she wanted to ask me something but she continued on, her breath getting shorter.

“He... It ... Vritra was able to use magic—magic that seemed to defy the common sense of any magic I’ve ever seen.” Alea’s lips began to quiver.

“What kind of magic did he use?”

“Metal. Black metal. He was able to instantaneously conjure metal spikes, blades, any sort of weapons from the ground and himself. I don’t even know how to describe it properly. It was over too quickly. Half of my team was dead in the first wave of attacks he unleashed with a simple flick of his wrist. When the ones that were still alive attacked him, he didn’t even bother to dodge... plates of black metal instantaneously materialized and blocked whatever attack that managed to get near him.”

I felt my face tense as I tried to visualize what Vritra’s, and possibly the powers his whole race, possessed. It seemed to be conjuring but on a completely different level. The way she described it made it seem more akin to manifestation or even creation of a certain phenomena rather than affecting the mana particles that already existed.

How was that even possible though? Were they capable of just skipping steps in the fundamental laws of magic in this world, or were they simply more knowledgeable and able to do this through a special skill?

My head immediately turned toward Alea at the sound of her coughing. It was worse than before. She coughed up blood.

“Vritra... He left after leaving me like this. I’m not sure if he knew someone was going to come, but the last thing he said before going was his name... and that Dicathen was going to become a warzone...” As blood dribbled down the corner of her mouth, she turned her head toward me.

“This may sound preposterous but can you do me a favor?” Alea let out a faint smile, revealing her teeth, stained with blood.

“Sure, anything.” I expected her to leave me with an item or message, perhaps for a loved one back home or maybe to her family.

“... hold me?” she mumbled.

I leaned in closer, only hearing the last part. "Sorry. I didn't quite catch that."

"I always thought that I didn't need anyone... as long as I was strong enough. I never had a family or lover... to depend on... but you know? I-I really don't want to die alone right now..." Alea bit her trembling lower lip. "Can you hold me?"

Without saying a word, I gently wrapped my arms around Alea's fragile neck and waist, leaning her head against my chest.

"I'm scared," she muttered. "I don't want to die..."

I stayed silent, gritting my teeth as I, again, was unable to find the words to comfort her. Softly patting the back of Alea's head, I felt her breathing become weaker and weaker, and moments later—she passed away in my arms

The Beginning After The End – Chapter 70: An Unfamiliar Burden

My teeth were clenched the whole time as I willed a hole in the earth below us. Carefully placing Alea's cold, lifeless body into the center, I slowly covered her, using her weapon as a makeshift gravestone.

I couldn't even laugh at the sick irony that this dungeon happened to be named the Widow's Crypt...

Wordlessly, I spent some time burying each of Alea's fallen comrades. The once beautiful cave layered with a glossy bed of grass and a pond that glittered like shattered glass now looked like a national landmark of the fallen; the crude mounds of dirt and weapons for grave markers gave this place an eerie ambiance.

After finishing up the makeshift graves, I dragged my not-so-willing legs back to where I buried Alea. Kneeling, I placed my hand on the mound of dirt covering the once famous lance. She was considered the pinnacle of power here, no doubt respected and feared by many. However, to me, she was simply a girl—a lonely girl, regretful of the fact that she never had someone to love and someone to love her back.

As I looked at her in her final moments, a sense of dread dawned on me. She was almost exactly the same as I was from my past life, except she wouldn't be reborn into a different world. With my immediate reincarnation after my previous life ended, I didn't have the chance to even reflect on how I had lived. In Alea's last breaths, she had broken down and sobbed, crying that she didn't want to die like this.

"D\*\*n it..."

I rubbed my eyes as tears unknowingly began streaming down my face, indignant in her stead at how her life came to an end.

Sending out another mental transmission to Sylvie, I sighed in defeat when I didn't hear a reply. Slumping back down against the jagged walls Alea and I had leaned against, I recalled everything the fallen lance had informed me of. From the information she was able to gather, there were a couple of speculations I could make.

One, there was more than just one black-horned demon. How many, I wasn't sure. My only hope was that there wouldn't be many. If one of them could easily kill a lance or gravely injure a dragon like Sylvie, then I was out of my league.

Two, they were definitely after something. I wasn't sure what, but my mind kept wandering back to the egg Sylvie had come from that the demon had called a "gem." If they really were after Sylvie, then avoiding them indefinitely wasn't going to be possible.

Three, there was going to be a war in Dicathen. This continent would be in danger and we definitely weren't prepared. When the demon told Alea that there would be a war, though, I felt the underlying explanation that the black-horned demons weren't from this continent. Was the new continent that we just uncovered filled with these demons? I shuddered at that thought. Hopefully that scenario wouldn't come true.

However, the more I contemplated, the more certain I became that there probably weren't that many black-horned demons. If there truly was a race filled with super-powered demons, then they would've already annihilated this continent with ease instead of sneaking around different dungeons and infecting the beasts. They were obviously uncertain of whether they could take on this whole continent so they were going about it discreetly, at least for now.

What bugged me was trying to figure out when the war would be. There was no marked calendar and no way to guess. Was waiting the only thing I could do... what we could do?

A sharp pain in my hands made me realize how hard I was clenching my fists, leaving me to watch the drops of blood running down my forearm.

What I was slowly learning, and what Alea's death reinforced, was the realization of how valuable the relationships I had with my families, with Tess, and with my friends, were. What I didn't have in my past life were loved ones I would give my life to protect. I had that now, but I don't have the strength to protect them; not for what was about to come.

For the amount of potential I had, I was getting complacent. That needed to change.

I recalled Sylvia's message for me after she teleported me into Elshire Forest. Her message still rang clearly in my head; her voice echoing that I would hear from her again once my core reached past the white stage.

That was the most certain method I currently knew of to be able to get some reliable answers on what was going on. I was still unable to break from the threshold of dark yellow stage though. After yellow was silver, and then white. I still have a bit to go.

A ferocious roar sounded, echoing off the cavern walls. 'Papa!'

My head perked up as I heard a loud crash soon after from the direction of where I fell. Picking myself up, I dashed towards Sylvie's voice, stopping in front of a cloud of dust and calling out to her.

I'm here, Sylv, are you okay? I covered my face with my arms as the cloud of dust instantly blew away, revealing my precious bond in her full glory.

My heart thumped in excitement as I saw my dragon come into view.

Sylvie had become even more fearsome than when I saw her at the Dire Tombs. Her scales weren't glossy anymore like before—instead, they were now a dignified matte black. Her two horns had grown even longer, going past her snout, and another pair of horns protruded underneath them. If she looked crudely fierce back then, the feeling I got now was more akin to awe. She appeared as majestic as she did deadly. The spikes she had running down her back were no longer there and rather, because of that, she seemed more refined. Her gem-like iridescent yellow eyes pierced through me, making me doubt that she was the one who had just called me Papa.

'Papa! You're okay!'

Distilling all of the bewilderment that had kept me from approaching my bond, she, once again, lifted me up from the ground with the force of her lick.

"Haha! You got bigger again, Sylv!" I beamed a childish smile. Hugging the snout of my dragon, Sylvie let out a deep purr as she rubbed herself against me, and just for a moment, I was able to forget everything I'd just been through.

Lifting me off the ground with her snout, she placed me on her muscular broad back.

'Hold on, Papa! Let's get out of here.' With a powerful snap of her wings, a raging gust formed underneath us and we were instantly propelled into the air. For some reason, the sudden force didn't affect my body as I comfortably rode on the back of my ten-meter long dragon.

During the flight back up, my bond and I caught up on everything that happened while we were separated. She didn't really understand everything about the demons and the upcoming war but she did get the sense that whatever was about to happen wasn't good.

'Don't worry. Whatever happens, I'll be with you!' Sylvie's innocent response left me chuckling.

Like a narration from a children's book, she announced a bit about what she'd been up to, which was, not surprisingly, fighting beasts and consuming beast cores. I really needed to be there with Sylvie the next time she trained; I was curious as to what she was capable of. Sylvie didn't really know the distinction between the levels of mana beasts so I was left pondering over how powerful she really was.

'Hmph! I'm really strong!'

"Haha, I know I know." Patting the hard scales on Sylvie's neck, we soon arrived at the entrance of the dungeon.

As we landed in front of the ruined staircase leading up to the surface, I took a glance back to see the hundreds of minion snarler corpses. Sylvie transformed back into her fox form and leapt on top of my head, taking a couple of spins before perching comfortably in my hair.

Augmenting mana into my body, I lightly jumped from broken stair to broken stair, careful not to collapse the fragile remains of the staircase that was once worn down to an ivory smoothness.

A full moon greeted us as we reached the surface and, as expected, there was no one here. I breathed an outward sigh of relief knowing that everyone else made it back safely to Xyrus.

It'll be a several hour trek to the nearest teleportation gate so I decided to hurry. However, making sure there wasn't anyone hiding nearby, I released a pulse of wind around me. Taking out the seal from my

dimension ring, I carefully inspected it. As I was about to put it on, an image of Alea flashed into my mind. I took out the black fragment of the demon's horn—the horn of the demon that killed her.

Instead of putting on the seal, I took a deep breath and put the seal back into my dimension ring.

My stomach tightened and my eyes narrowed as a churning sensation stirred inside me. No more hiding. I had bigger things to worry about now. I couldn't be bothered with stressing over something like this. This demon horn shard would be my constant reminder of that.

'What's that, Papa?' Sylvie's head popped up as her paw tried reaching for the black shard.

"It's my goal, Sylvie," I grimaced as determination swelled up in the pit of my stomach. Patting my bond's furry little head, I began my trip back.

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Needless to say, the guard in charge of the teleportation gate looked fairly startled when he saw me. He must've received orders to be on the lookout for me because, as soon as he verified who I was, he hurriedly began making multiple calls using the artifact he had on hand.

Quickly ushering me through the gate, I arrived back at Xyrus feeling a little queasy as Sylvie slumbered on the crown of my head. There was a driver waiting for me on the other side. Giving me a sympathetic smile, he tipped his hat before opening the door for me.

My mind wasn't completely there as I kept thinking of the future. For the first time in both of my lives, I felt a heavy burden weighing down on me. The pressure of keeping my loved ones safe; I've never had that even while I was a king. The weight of a country I had no affection for in my previous life couldn't compare to the few lives I would give my everything for in this one.

When I reached Helstea Manor, I stopped in front of the giant double doors. Somehow, I couldn't bring myself to knock on the doors to my own home.

What would my family's expressions be? It seemed like every time I went out, all I did was worry them.

Taking a seat on the top of the stairs, I just let out a sharp, bitter sigh. Looking up at the night sky, I could see the faint colorations that supposedly signaled the coming of the festival. The sky turning blue, yellow, red and green indicated when the Aurora Constellate would begin. My eyes focused on a solitary cloud, slow-dancing above me without a care in the world. What an envious position to be in.

"Son?"

Lost in my thoughts, I didn't even hear the door open behind me.

"Hi Dad, I'm back." I gave him a weak smile.

"Why didn't you come in? We heard from the teleportation gatekeeper that you arrived at Xyrus." My father took a seat next to me when I didn't respond. "Your mother will be fine, Art," he said warmly, gently patting my back.

"I worried you guys again, didn't I? It feels like that's all I'm really good for nowadays," I chortled, knots churning in my chest as I said this.



I turned my head to my father and saw him gazing up at the sky like I had been just moments ago.

“She really loves the Aurora Constellate. Your mother may not seem like it, but she’s strong, Arthur, even more so than me. If you think that all you’ve given us are worries, then you’re wrong. Both you and your sister have given your mother and I so much more than we could’ve hoped for.”

“I know that you’re not like the normal children your age; hell, I’ve known that since you were born. I don’t know what sort of destiny you’ll be caught up in, but I don’t think it’ll be anything you can’t handle.” The skin around his eyes wrinkled as he gave me a reassuring smile.

I stayed silent, unable to form the right words.

“What I don’t want you to do is feel like you’re being a burden on us. All of this guilt that you’re feeling right now, the weight that you’re probably feeling—I want you to come to us so that we can be there for you. I don’t ever want you to feel like you can’t come home, that you aren’t welcome. As long as you have the use of your two legs, I expect you to come home whenever you can and let us love you. That is our right as your parents. Okay?” My father ran his fingers through his trim, auburn hair in a gesture that revealed how he wasn’t used to saying things like this. And just like that, the weight I felt accumulating inside slowly dispersed.

“Got it, Dad.” I managed a more sincere smile this time and he responded with his signature foolish grin.

“Come on, let’s go home. Once inside, a more ferocious beast than anything you’ve ever faced awaits,” my father whispered darkly before both of us broke out into a fit of laughter.