

After The End 71

The Beginning After The End – Chapter 71: Evolving

When we stepped inside the house, the temperature seemed to have suddenly dropped. In contrast to the icy atmosphere, though, my mother's fiery gaze pierced down at me from the top of the stairs, the corners of her eyes struggling to keep her tears from rolling down her cheeks.

"Hello, Mother, I'm... back?" Cold sweat permeated through my pores as a pressure akin to an S class mana beast weighed down on my very soul.

I had to admit, I wasn't looking so sharp. My body was a canvas of nicks and scratches and my hair probably looked like it had been struck by lightning repeatedly, as if one strike wasn't to its satisfaction. The entire back of my uniform was nonexistent from when it was sandpapered away as I fell down the hole.

"Arthur Leywin..." My mother's voice dripped with frost.

Before she had the chance to say anything more, a familiar voice instantly broke the tension in the room.

"BROTHERRR!" My baby sister bolted down the stairs past Mother, stumbling on the way down, and took a leap into my chest, her arms immediately clinging around me with the strength of a python on steroids.

"Erk! E-Ellie, it hurts..." my voice came out raspy as I gently patted my sister's head.

"A teacher came and said you... you were lost," Ellie managed in between snuffles.

My sister rubbed her face against my chest while attempting her almost incoherent string of words, as if wanting to burrow herself inside me.

Sylvie had stirred awake at this point. With her ears drooping down, she consolingly licked my sister's cheek.

"I know... I'm sorry for worrying you guys...again." I looked up at my mother as I said this, my voice dropping to almost a whisper.

I could tell by her expression that she was torn between whether to scold me or just be happy.

Maybe she would do both.

My father took this chance to walk over to my mother and gently lead her down the stairs, comforting her.

"There's a time to be angry, Honey, but now isn't the time. Look, it's your son. He's back." My father's soothing voice eased the tension between my mother's brows. As her expression softened, so did her will.

Breaking down into s\*\*s, she wrapped her arms around me from the side, triggering a chain reaction, thus, causing my sister who was still wrapped around me to begin bawling her eyes out yet again.

My mother's s\*\*s made her soliloquy almost indiscernible; she seemed to switch between cursing God to thanking him.

"It's not fair..."

"Why is my son the one that keeps getting so hurt?"

"Thank God, you're safe!"

My father and I made eye contact and he gave me a reassuring half-smile while he gently patted my bawling sister and mother, both of whom were angrily thumping me with their trembling fists, crying.

Their fists didn't particularly hurt but each shaking strike seemed to gnaw away at me; the guilt ate away at my insides, as I stood there, motionless, biting my quivering lower lip.

It took about a good hour before they calmed down; both my sister and mother reduced to a state of heavy panting and constant hiccups.

Somewhere in the middle of our scene, I spotted Lilia's mother, Tabitha, peeking from upstairs. I could tell she wanted to come down and comfort my mother and sister but before she could, Vincent pulled her back, giving me a meaningful nod.

Eventually, we got ourselves situated in the living room. My sister's breathing was still erratic to the point of worry, her arms wrapped around Sylvie. My mother was a bit better as her swollen eyes probed for any serious wounds before placing a gentle hand on my chest.

"... And let Heaven and Earth heal." As she ended her chant, a soft white glow enveloped my body.

Almost immediately, I felt a soothing warmth covering every wound, even the ones I didn't know I had.

As the healing glow dissipated along with my injuries, I looked at my mother's concentrated face.

I wanted to ask.

Why could she use her healing powers now?

How was she able to heal Dad when he had been struck by the mage on the way to Xyrus? I still remembered her desperately healing my father as he ordered me to take my mother and run. That was before I'd fallen off the cliff.

But I bit my tongue and forced a smile. My father was right; I should wait for her to tell me first.

My mother let out a sigh before taking her hand off my chest. She stared at me, and gave me one more firm, wordless hug.

We eventually began talking about what happened. My father took a brief moment to tell me how Professor Glory had visited and told them what had happened to me before she had to hurry back. All the while, my sister sat wordlessly on the couch, curled up with Sylvie, as she seemingly stared at a particular spot on the ground in front of her.

On my end, I tried not to make a big deal of what transpired for the sake of my mother. I skimmed over the fight with the minion crawlers, telling them how there was just a bit more than we expected.

Both my parents gave me a face that told me they didn't believe it was that simple. They knew me too well.

How much was I supposed to tell them?

My mind lingered towards the fragment of the demon's horn that floated inside the dimension ring I was twisting with my thumb.

The scene flashed through with such clarity, as if plastered to my brain. The dismembered corpses... The river of blood... Alea...

Taking a deep breath, I told them the full story. All of it...

...at least, until where I landed.

I never understood why those old stiffs from the Council in my previous world used to say 'ignorance is bliss' ...until now.

Nothing good would come out of knowing everything I witnessed at the bottom of that dungeon earlier today.

My mother's hoarse voice broke the silence that followed after my story.

"When Professor Glory came in yesterday during the middle of the night, she was wounded and tired, but from her expression, I knew she wasn't even thinking about that."

"She said that you stayed behind with her to save the class. She told me you were a hero. But you know what? I didn't care." Her voice barely made it to a whisper as she trembled slightly.

"More so than some hero, I just wanted my son to come home without being half-dead every time. What if one of these days..." My mother couldn't finish her sentence as tears began streaming down her face once more.

"Art, you're only twelve, but why does it feel like I've almost lost you so many times already?" Her voice choked.

Words failed to form again as I stared blankly at a particular mole on my mother's arm. How was I supposed to respond? Her question felt like a trap with no right answer.

"Honey, that's enough." My father reached for Mother's hand and grasped it tenderly.

I realized that, just like how I was growing, my parents were growing as well. My father's once immature, haughty side had been molded into a mature and gentle demeanor. He was still the same father that cracked jokes, but he had a layer of depth now that most likely came with raising my sister.

My mother had always been on the mature side but through the years, she'd become a bit more refined. Associating with the Helstea House and with Tabitha and Vincent's friends had made her more elegant, but right now, she seemed to have reverted back to an earlier age when her emotions weren't as stable.

I didn't blame her. I would probably be tempted to lock Ellie indoors if she ever came home even half as wounded as I had earlier today.

The rest of the conversation went by a bit more comfortably. Tabitha and Vincent came down after noticing that things seemed to have settled. I hadn't seen them in quite a while so after greeting them, we all took some time to catch up.

Soon, Ellie was nodding off to sleep so I carried her to her room, leaving Sylvie with her. Even in her sleep, my sister still sniffled from crying so much. Through the night, she didn't say a word. I knew that this episode had been pretty traumatic for her. A professor actually visited them, after all, and told them that I was missing. If not for the ring that my mother wore telling her that I, at the very least, had not died, she probably would've fainted.

It might actually have been worse for my mother, in this case, to have the ring. All she could do was stare at the ring, waiting for it to notify her that her son had died. What kind of mother would be fine after going through that?

Getting to my room, I slipped out of my tattered uniform and washed up. I planted my face directly against the current of the warm, gushing water, almost wanting it to erase what had occurred earlier in the dungeon. Alea's last moments kept pounding into my skull, a constant reminder of how weak I was.

The image broke as two short knocks tapped against my door.

"Can I come in?"

"Sure," I replied.

My father entered, closing the door behind him before taking a seat next to me on my bed.

"Arthur, don't mind too much what your mother said tonight. She may have said she didn't want a hero but we are both proud of what you did back there in the dungeon. Knowing that my son isn't someone who would abandon his allies is something I can take absolute pride in."

I always knew when my father was serious because he would call me by my full name instead of my nickname, Art.

"I don't know what really happened back there in the dungeon and I won't ask, but just know that I'll support whatever you decide to do."

I struggled to swallow the knot that formed in my throat upon hearing my father's last sentence. It was supposed to be a supportive statement but all I felt was a sour taste in my mouth.

Without giving me a chance to respond, my father stood up and ruffled my hair. Opening the door to my room, he turned his head and gave me a goofy grin before walking out.

I didn't immediately go to sleep when he closed the door behind him. Instead, I sat cross-legged, and began doing something I haven't done seriously in a long time—train.

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The dark yellow core inside the pit of my sternum had cracks all over it, signaling that I was about to break through soon.

The various noises of the night were drowned out as I keenly focused on the activity going on inside me. Wind, Earth, Fire, Water... these were the basic elemental attributes that mana contained, but that was it; they were merely attributes.

When mana circulated inside the core and throughout the body, it wasn't distinguished as anything other than simple mana. Like the ki in my old world, it was formless, attributeless, and pure. Over time, mana adapted to its surroundings and formed attributes. For example, near regions in the north where there was much more snow and water, magic pertaining to those elements would obviously become stronger due to the attributes of the mana. The mana, depending on the environment, slowly changed and contained attributes to better exist there.

As mages, we were able to absorb, purify and guide mana with our will into different shapes and forms that we called "spells."

The purer our mana core was, the higher the capability we had in manipulating the existing mana inside us. As to how well one utilized their mana, that would depend on how creative, sharp, and skillful the mage was in battle.

The whole aspect of elements lay in the underlying fact that everyone had elements that they were naturally more sensitive to—being able to manifest and shape that pure, attributeless mana into an element being the cause.

Alea, along with the other Lances, was most likely a white core mage, capable of causing widespread devastation if she truly wished to. Yet, Alea had been so easily defeated and killed by that black-horned demon.

Every pore in my body took part in absorbing the surrounding mana as the mana inside my core swirled fiercely.

I imagined the sound of the outer layer of my core cracking as the bright yellow underneath the crumbling outer shell was revealed.

As I let out a deep breath, I stood up and opened my eyes to stare deeply at my hands. I willed mana out of my body and it began circulating around me.

Letting out an unsatisfied tch, I sat back down again and began cultivating once more. It took me almost the entire night to break through when I had already been on the brink anyway.

How much more did I have to train in order to even be on par with those demons? If even a white core mage had to give her life to merely chip off a fragment of the demon's horn, what stage did I have to get to?

What would happen after breaking past the white core stage?

The Beginning After The End – Chapter 72: A Confusing Day

I decided to stay home one more day before heading back to school. I was going to come back next week for the Aurora Constellate, but I guess Mother and Ellie had developed some sort of trauma, that I was going to somehow get hurt every time I left home.

I knew that I had people to inform but I owed it to them to be there.

As a change of pace, I was determined to spend time with my family, namely my mother and sister. Father left at dawn for work after checking up on me so it would just be myself and the girls. Tabitha decided to tag along and after a rather brief discussion; they wanted to go shopping. It was fairly apparent to me that they wouldn't take no for an answer.

Sigh...

I could at least use that chance to take a detour, after, to Xyrus Academy. I knew that everyone was safe according to what my parents heard from Professor Glory, but I shouldn't keep them in the dark about what happened to me for an extra day. I was also a bit worried about the condition of Tess's assimilation.

I lost count of the many places we visited after the umpteenth store but I didn't dare show my displeasure in front of the girls. While browsing through the stores, I realized how ignorant I was. The fact that the only time I'd visited the shops was a bit after I was first reborn into this world, struck me; this, coupled with the fact that I had no noteworthy equipment besides my sword, made me contemplate getting new equipment. I still remembered the time when I was slung on Mother's back and got to see all of the small tents filled with merchandise back up in the tiny town of Ashber.

Most of my childhood was spent in the Kingdom of Elenoir, more specifically, inside the castle. Even the previous time I went shopping with the ladies, we went directly to the fashion district so nothing appealed to me. There were some items with protective capabilities from either their material or from runes etched into the inside, but nothing powerful enough to catch my interest.

"Aunt Helstea, are there stores where they sell something that can help me train faster?" I asked while we headed inside a store that exclusively sold scarves.

"Hmm? You mean elixirs? Of course." Tabitha gave me a confused look as if I had asked some sort of trick question.

I'd never used the elixirs here, but if they were anything like the drugs some practitioners used in my old world, then I didn't want to go anywhere near them.

"There's actually a small elixir and medicine shop around the corner if you want to go take a look while we shop for some scarves..."

That was all I needed to hear before strategically bolting out the store.

"Thank you! I'll meet you in front of the store!" I shouted while running out after carefully dropping the bags I was assigned to carry.

"Kyu!" 'Don't leave me!'

I saw Sylvie extend a paw out towards me in a desperate attempt to escape Ellie's firm hold on her but I just gave her a look of condolence before running off.

Your sacrifice will not be in vain, I saluted.

After turning the corner as per instructions, my face crumpled up in bewilderment.

This was a store?!

The corner I turned at led me into a narrow alleyway thugs probably used to mug unsuspecting passersby. At the end of the narrow alleyway was a dingy shack that even rats would find too revolting to live in. The wooden planks that made up the store looked like they had been painted with moss and fungus as a musty, stale air emanated out, drifting towards me. At least it complemented the sickly green weeds creeping out from the bottom of the store as if even they didn't want to be stuck there.

#### WINDSOM'S POTIONS AND MEDICINES

I had to tilt my head to read the etched title on the angled sign, which had been barely dangling on a single nail.

Did they really sell potions and medicines there? I would be less surprised if they sold bottled diseases and poisons.

"Spare some change, young lad?" A haggard voice startled me out of my stupefied state.

Beside me sat a pale old man with a hand reached out towards me, palms up.

I immediately took a step back in surprise, instinctively layering my body with mana.

How did I not sense this old man that was almost right next to me?

"You look like you've seen a ghost, young lad. I'm but a mere aged man asking for some change." The old man's face wrinkled as he revealed a pearly white smile that didn't match his ragged state.

"Ah yeah, sure." I reached in my pocket for a copper coin, using the opportunity to take a closer look at him.

With a thick, uncombed bed of pepper-tinted hair that fell down to his slightly hunched shoulders, he looked up at me with milky eyes. The old man's wizened face, though, didn't come off to me as weak and weary, but intelligent and bright, for some reason. I could tell that this man was probably very handsome in his youth, which all the more made me feel a bit disheartened seeing him end up like this.

"Many thanks, young lad." His gnarled hands nimbly grabbed the coin out of my hand with a speed that surprised me.

Between his middle and index fingers was a coin that was silver instead of copper.

S\*\*t! I gave him a silver coin by mistake! That was a hundred copper coins!

"Wait... I meant to give you this..." I reached into my pocket again and when I made sure that this time, the coin in my hand was indeed copper, I looked back up to see that the old man was gone.

"What the f..." I stood there, bewildered for the third time in the last 5 minutes.

My money...

After letting a helpless sigh escape my lips, I took a step forward towards Windsom's potion shack. I reached for the handle of the wooden door that seemed like it would break upon mere contact when I felt a concentration of mana from the copper doorknob.

Coating my hand in mana, I wrapped my fingers around the k\*\*b, preparing to turn it, when a stiff jolt coursed through my hand and up my arm. Thankfully, the mana protecting my hand helped me from pulling away so I forcefully twisted the k\*\*b, opening the door.

As soon as the door unlocked, the shock stopped as well. Pushing open the creaking door, I'm welcomed by a breeze of something indescribably horrendous. The stench was so strong that it immediately triggered a stream of coughs from me.

"Oh, a customer! What can I do for you?" a familiar voice welcomed me.

"You!" I couldn't help but point my finger at him in both anger and confusion. It was the same homeless old man that disappeared after taking my silver coin!

"What brings you in here?" He looked at me with an innocent expression.

I sighed in frustration. "Can I just have my coin back? I need that money to buy some stuff I need... and besides, you said you were homeless." I stuck my hand out towards him.

"No, no... I said I was but a mere aged man. Based on the environment where you met me and by my appearance and demeanor, you assumed I was homeless." He wagged his finger at me in a scolding manner, as if I was the one in the wrong. "How about this, you can pick one item here for free as a thank you for the present," he continued in a magnanimous manner as he twiddled my silver coin between his fingers, mockingly.

My brows twitched in annoyance but I calmed myself down and quickly took a scan around the sorry excuse of a store.

"Are you sure there are even items here worth a silver coin?" My voice came out with a twinge of frustration in it.

"Of course! I don't give this chance to just anyone, you know. You just have to choose carefully." The old man's eyes gave off the excited twinkle of a second-rate gambler with a winning hand.

I rubbed my temples to try and calm the boiling rage stirring up inside of me.

The elderly should be respected, Arthur.

The elderly should be respected...

By this time, my nose had become accustomed to the mysterious stench that had the power to drive even the most ferocious mana beasts away. Taking a look through the shelves caked with dust, I became more and more amazed at how this place was still even running.

"Don't you ever clean this place, old man?" I asked as I slid my finger along one of the shelves. I could probably build a snowman out of dust with the amount collected here.

“Are you asking an aged man like myself to do manual labor?” He gasped sarcastically, putting on a horrified expression.

“Nevermind.” I couldn’t help but roll my eyes at this man. I couldn’t gauge him and that made it all the harder for me to trust him.

Making my way past the half-open boxes blocking the path, I went towards the shelves near the back of the store.

While scanning through the various vials and containers filled with either murky liquid or colored pills, I was startled by a figure sitting on the top of the shelf.

Dammit, what was with this place?

I couldn’t sense anything inside here until it was right in front of my nose.

The figure became more apparent as I focused on it; it was an almost pitch black cat. The only part of its body that wasn’t black were the tufts of white fur in front of its ears, but that wasn’t what caught my attention. It was the cat’s captivating eyes. Eyes that seemed as if it held the universe inside them. They looked like mirrored night skies with bright twinkling stars sprinkled inside them, with white, vertical slitted pupils glowing like a crescent moons.

As I stayed fixated on the cat’s bewitching eyes, the cat peered back down at me from the top of the shelf with a sense of obvious superiority before it turned back and walked away.

Shaking my head, I focused back on the various bottles and containers when a small black box catches my attention.

Picking up the plain box, roughly about the size of something you would use to store small jewelry, I tried to open it. With a small click, the hinge came undone to reveal a small ring inside it. I brought the ring closer to my face when the ‘gem’ embedded into the ring suddenly squirted something out towards me.

Instantly, I whipped my head to the side so the stream of clear liquid missed and landed behind me.

It was water.

“Tch... you dodged it.” I turned my head back to see the old man grumbling while still fiddling with my silver coin.

“...”

At this point, I felt like if I stayed any longer, I would lose my sanity. First, the shocking doorknob... now, this squirting ring. This old man sure loved his pranks... even his cat looked down on me.

But I was determined. If I could get anything inside this store for free, I was going to get the most valuable item inside this store.

I must’ve spent at least an hour inside, just combing through elixirs that I didn’t need. Why would a twelve-year-old need an elixir for hair growth?

“Kyu!” ‘Papa! I’m here!’

A white blur whizzed past the door that was left open and landed on my head.

“Kuu!” ‘Papa, you left me!’ Sylvie puffed while smacking my forehead with her paw.

You survived, comrade! I smiled, rubbing her tiny head.

“Old man, I can’t find anything I...” I began to say but the expression the old man had on his face made me stop. He was the one that looked like he saw ghost this time because his already pale face became whiter. His milky eyes that sagged down from old age looked like full moons, his expression stricken.

“We finally found...”

“You okay, old man?” I waved my hand in front of him. The shop owner shook his head and let out a cough.

“Yes, I’m quite alright.” His voice quivered a bit, confusing me.

“Anyway, old man, I can’t find anything worth taking back with me. Can’t you just give me back my money?” I grumbled as I took one last scan through the store.

“You really don’t have an eye for anything.” He walked out from behind his counter and strolled to one of the shelves in the front corner of the store.

“Ah, here we are.” Without even looking back, he tossed back to me a small ball about the size of a marble. It was layered in dust but when I wiped it clean, it was clear with specks of different colors floating inside it.

“What is this?” I asked as I brought the orb closer to my face to study it, making sure it wouldn’t spray me with water.

“Don’t worry, it’s something you’re going to need. Now scat. Teasing you bores me.” He shoed me off.

“Okay, okay.” I walked out of the store on my own, taking one last look back at the old shack.

As I strolled out of the narrow alleyway, I spotted the black cat gazing at me and then Sylvie before turning away as if it had lost interest.

Thinking little of it, I reached the intersection out of the alley and turn the corner to see my mother and sister sitting down at a table with Tabitha.

“Hi Brother!” Ellie waved while holding a drink with her other hand.

“Did you find what you were looking for?” Mother asked as she put down her refreshment as well.

“I...think?” I scratched my head. I put the clear orb inside my dimension ring to study it later but I couldn’t help but think that it wasn’t anything special.

“Oh really? That store is considered famous for having quite the variety of elixirs and medicines to help with training. Most of the students in Xyrus go there to shop for training materials.” Tabitha got up, picking all of the shopping bags off the floor.

“What? That shabby old place?” I replied, surprised that a bunch of rich snobby brats would go out of their way to shop at a rundown shack.

“Shabby? What are you talking about?” My mother and sister got up too, handing me their bags nonchalantly.

As we walked towards the alleyway, Tabitha turned the corner first and pointed at the shop.

“I wouldn’t say it’s shabby,” she said, a bit confused by my comment.

“Really? If that’s not shabby then I don’t know...”

My jaw dropped along with the shopping bags I was holding onto.

In place of the previous narrow alleyway leading towards the worn-down shack was a marble-paved road laid out towards a three-story building with a gold sign that read:

XYRUS ELIXIRS

The Beginning After The End – Chapter 73: One Fallen

Throughout the rest of the shopping trip, I was in a daze as my thoughts lingered on the transforming alleyway.

Was I already becoming senile?

“Mom... Aunt Tabitha... Do streets in Xyrus... er... move on their own?” The statement sounded as crazy as I thought, even though it came from my own lips.

“Huh? Moving streets?” I could almost see the manifestation of question marks on top of their heads as they gazed quizzically at me.

“Ahaha.... Never mind.” I let out a sigh as I looked back at the street where Xyrus Elixirs now stood.

“Did something happen at the elixir store, Arthur?” Tabitha asked.

“You didn’t cause trouble in there, did you?!” my mother followed.

“Do you assume I cause trouble every time I’m away, Mother?”

“Of course,” both my mother and sister responded in unison.

Ouch.

I clutch my chest over heart as I put on a hurt expression, getting a laugh out of everyone.

The rest of the shopping trip went by without any other occurrences that broke the laws of matter or physics. My new DC uniform had to be ordered from school since it was different from the rest of the school’s outfits so I didn’t have anything else I needed to buy.

My mother and sister, along with Tabitha, once again tried to use me as a human mannequin. This time, even the teenage store clerks joined in while occasionally taking peeks through the changing room curtains with stares comparable to starving animals looking at fresh meat.

Was it weird that I feared for my life more so on these occasions than when I fought in dungeons?

After hours of shopping, the staggering amount of clothes that filled the numerous bags were probably enough to open up a small store. Fortunately, the driver came by every hour or so to relieve us of the bulk of our purchases.

Out of that pile, the only clothes that belonged to me were a set of sleepwear that I found to be too comfortable not to buy. Supposedly it was made from the wool of a particular type of mana beast.

The sun began its further descent from the edge of the city, reminding me that Xyrus was indeed a floating plot of land.

As we reached the carriage waiting for us on the other end of the shopping district, I noticed that there was a separate wagon attached to the back, holding all the clothes and accessories we (they) bought.

“Mom, I’m going to stop by Xyrus before heading back home,” I said after placing the last of the bags I was holding onto the carriage.

“Why? Is something wrong?” A jolt of panic flashed in my mother’s eyes.

“Haha, no. I just thought it wouldn’t be good to keep everyone wondering if I was dead or alive,” I chuckled.

“Ahh, it was just that. Go on then, of course you should tell everyone that you’re back safe and sound. Just don’t make any other detours on the way back,” my mother responded, pinching my nose as she gave me a stern look.

“Gotcha!” My voice came out nasally as I replied.

Sylvie and I watched as everyone climbed into the carriage and left. Waving back to my sister who was yelling that I had to be back in time for dinner, I turned and headed towards Xyrus Academy.

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Xyrus Academy wasn’t too far from the shopping district but it was still a bit of a distance to travel on foot. The sun was beginning to set as we made our way to Director Goodsky’s office, which was on the top floor of the second highest building in the school, losing only to the bell tower that served as a useful lookout post for the Disciplinary Committee.

As the academy towers got closer, I willed mana into my body and jumped up to the roof of a nearby building. Skirting from one building to the next, the view around me became an indistinct blur, the only thing clearly visible being Sylvie, who was racing alongside me, enjoying the breeze.

Making our way to school in silence, my mind began wandering.

It was when my mind wandered that I thought of things that I would rather not think of.

The scene of Alea’s last moments flashed through my mind. How she, in all of her glory and mightiness, had still been afraid of dying... dying alone. What if the one that I held in my arms hadn’t been Alea but Tess?

My body shivered at the thought.

How was she doing? Was she well? Did her assimilation go through all right? What if something went wrong...

No. You can't think like that, Arthur. Positive thoughts...

Gritting my teeth, I willed more mana through my body and sped up.

Without the seal inhibiting me, I felt the deep influence of mana surrounding everything. I ran faster, as fast as I could possibly go, as if running away from my own thoughts.

The wind bent to my will, pushing me forward as the earthen surfaces of the buildings almost seem to resonate and keep me in balance by its own will. The moisture in the atmosphere kept me cool and even the small flames from the lamps burnt brighter as I passed them by.

I'd noticed before but the more my mana core evolved, the more sensitive I became to mana; I could even go as far as to say I was becoming more integrated with the mana around me.

I thought back to when I first met Virion. I wasn't nearly as sensitive to mana back then, but even I could tell that, around him, the mana would fluctuate and move to accommodate his presence. Even though both Virion and Director Goodsky were wind attribute mages, the way they influenced the mana around them were vastly different.

For Director Goodsky, the mana formed light breezes of wind that danced around her; for Virion, it was the opposite. The mana affected the air around Gramps by completely expelling any wind in his vicinity. It wasn't as apparent normally, but when he switched into fighting mode, it felt like even the air was afraid to move near him.

If that sort of phenomenon occurred naturally from just a silver core mage, what would it be like if they broke through to the white stage?

I felt a twinge of regret when I realized that Alea was the only white core mage I'd seen in person so far. Yet, because her mana core was completely shattered by the black spike that pierced through her, even the mana disregarded her, as if she was no longer loved by nature.

"Kyu!" 'We're almost here!'

Sylvie's chirpy voice snapped me out of my thoughts as I focused my gaze onto the light coming out of the window of Director Goodsky's office.

Sylvie, come over here.

My bond jumped into my arms as I prepared to take off. The academy ground had a barrier that repelled anything with a mana core or beast core that wasn't permitted to enter. It wasn't all that powerful since its main function was to notify if there was anyone passing through unauthorized. I had my DC uniform in my dimension ring, along with the knife that was used for authorization, so I wouldn't set off the alarm; Sylvie, on the other hand, might, if she wasn't attached to me.

Concentrating the mana from my core and willing it to take the form of wind underneath the soles of my feet, I leaped off the edge of the building's roof I was on with as much strength as I could muster.

"HAAAAAAP!"

I felt the building almost giving out as a whirlwind sprung up and propelled me higher. I must've been about 100 meters in the air when I realized that by the trajectory and speed I was traveling, I probably wasn't going to make it all the way to the building.

"HOLD ON, SYLV!"

As the anxiety faded, excitement boiled in me as I yelled over the gushing wind that attempted to drown out my voice. Feeling Sylvie's paws clinging to my shirt, I held her tighter as well.

Biting my lip with concentration, I drove all of my unwanted thoughts away.

Shifting my body weight so that my feet were right underneath me, I turned in midair, and released a roundhouse kick.

[Draft Step]

I activated the skill I'd used against Theo that allowed me to accelerate or change direction by using an opposing force of wind to push against my feet. Of course, this time, it consumed a lot more mana as I was basically changing direction mid-air and at a much greater speed, but I got the outcome I hoped for.

With the speed boost I got from Draft Step, I was once again on a collision course straight towards the rooftop of the building Director Goodsky's office was in.

"!!!!!!!!!!!!!"

Whether it was due to being drunk from the adrenaline rush, or just me trying to forcefully get rid of the depressing memories that were always haunting me in the back of my mind, I couldn't help but let out a soul-cleansing roar. The sensation of flying through the air like this was different from when I rode on Sylvie.

Just as I realized that I hadn't quite planned my landing, my body already shot through the air and noisily crashed against several unidentified objects. Despite destroying some of the roof, I somehow managed to land on my feet. As expected of me.

"KYU!!!" 'THAT WAS FUN! LET'S DO THAT AGAIN!'

Sylvie hopped in circles around me as she continued chirping for a second round.

Patting the dust off of my clothes, I looked up.

From the edge of the building, I was able to see a sight I was never able to experience even in my past life.

Xyrus was a floating city; I seemed to constantly forget this fact. I was able to see the edge of the city where isolated clouds floated nearby. I continued to be mesmerized as the rays from the setting sun hit the clouds at an angle that made them appear fiery red. Contrasting against the sun-kissed sky below was a curtain of serene purple—the atmosphere.

"Kyu..." Sylvie propped her head up on the ledge as she gazed silently as well.

The word breathtaking wasn't just an expression in this case. It was as if Xyrus City was floating on an endless sea of soft marigold that blended harmoniously with the starry night above. That sort of view, that only seemed to be present in fairy-tales, was only made possible due to the city's high elevation.

I took out a metal necklace from my dimension ring and began mindlessly fiddling with it.

...

For the time that I stood there leaning against the ledge of the building, I was almost able to forget about what happened back in the dungeon; for that brief period of time, the world seemed perfect.

"Quite the view, isn't it?" a familiar aged voice echoed from behind.

"It is..." I replied without turning back.

"It's my most treasured spot, you know... I come here often when I want to rest my mind," she breathed.

"Mm."

"I see you made quite the landing. I'll have to have Tricia come clean all this up."

"I apologize for that, I'll help as well."

"I heard your battle cry. I suspect the whole school will be wondering what happened."

"Haha..." I let out a stifled laugh.

"..."

I expected Goodsky to come join us, but instead, she stayed where she was.

"You're not going to ask me how I'm still alive?" I asked as my eyes stayed glued to the view of the horizon.

"It seemed like it wasn't a good time to ask. I am just glad that you are alive and well." Goodsky's voice was quiet, almost feeble.

"I'm well?" I asked myself under my breath.

"Am I well?" I repeated, loud enough for her to hear, a tinge of sadness evident in my tone.

"..."

I looked down at the necklace I was fiddling with. It was a small bloodstained slate of metal attached to a crude chain. Engraved on that slate was a picture of six lances forming a circle; underneath that insignia were the initials:

A.T.

Tracing the letters with my thumb, I scoffed at how much it looked like a dog tag—the same as those worn by soldiers during ancient times in my old world to identify them, just in case their corpses were mangled past the point of recognition.

“...What exactly happened down there, Arthur?” Director Goodsky’s voice was hesitant as she asked this.

Turning to face her with the best half-smile I could muster, I threw the tag over.

“This was what happened,” I replied as Goodsky let out a soft gasp with one hand covering her mouth, while the other held the necklace.

The Beginning After The End – Chapter 74: A Will’s Last Breath

CYNTHIA GOODSKY’S POV:

The Council had handed this simple adamantine tag, engraved with the owner’s initials, to each of the Six Lances. This idea had actually been thought up by the members of the Six Lances themselves.

When they requested this, they explained to The Council that they needed something made of an almost indestructible material so that even if their bodies were obliterated, the necklace would still be intact and used as a sort of identification. It would be a memento for them—a sort of grim reminder that they could die at any time.

In contrast to the grim faces of the Six Lances, I distinctly remember that The Council had joked with them, asking if there was anything even capable of destroying their bodies past the point of recognition. I recalled chuckling alongside them, even though I knew...

Even though I knew that...There were beings capable of wiping out the crowned lances off the face of this planet.

But why... why am I seeing this tag so soon? It was too early. They shouldn’t be moving this early. I estimated that it would take at least another 15 to 20 years before they would start making their move.

I thought I had time.

I thought we had time...

“Director?” Arthur’s inquisitive voice shook me out of my daze.

“Ah, yes... Arthur, do you mind if I hold onto this? It would be safe for me to assume that The Council would want this back.” I took careful notice of the tone of my voice to make sure I wouldn’t arouse suspicion from Arthur. The boy was just abnormally sharp.

“Things are changing, aren’t they.” It was supposed to be a question, but by the tone of Arthur’s voice, it sounded like a statement with implied conviction.

Was it wise for me to tell him? Or rather, did he already know something?

“Yes, but it isn’t something for you to worry about. Not yet, at least.” I knew my smile and comforting words wouldn’t reach him.

“Arthur, you may forget sometimes—hell, even I tend to forget at times—but you are still a child. A strong child with limitless potential, yes, but a child nevertheless. Let us adults take on the burden for now; your time will come, whether you wish for it or not.” As I said this, I realized this message was more for myself than for Arthur.

Yes, he was a child. It wouldn't be fair for him to become involved in the affairs of the Continent... but if he already knew...

"Did you perhaps... see whatever Alea fought against?" I had to choose my words carefully to make sure that my question didn't give anything away.

"No, I didn't." The answer was said with full confidence, but for some reason, his answer made me second-guess myself.

However, no use in suspecting the boy. It wouldn't make sense for him to hide anything about an event like this.

Still... I was glad he didn't seem to have figured anything out.

"I see... Well, enough about this topic. You must be worried about how everyone is doing." I let a soft, relieved smile escape as I said this.

ARTHUR LEYWIN'S POV:

The director's response somehow left a bad taste in my mouth. She sounded almost... relieved at my response.

"Yeah, how is everyone doing?" In the end, I decided to move on. There was no point in being skeptical of everyone around me. I'd just assume she skipped out on asking the details for my sake.

"As you may have already deduced, your classmates weren't all too injured. We had them sent to the guild infirmary hall to be cared for and thankfully, most were able to come to school today. Professor Glory was actually the most wounded, but she refused to be healed until all of her students were treated. I heard she even paid a visit to your family to notify them of your disappearance after transporting everyone back." Director Goodsky chuckled.

"That's good, that's good... And how is Tess doing?" I inquired.

Goodsky's face wrinkled a bit as she displayed obvious hesitation.

"Tess... Tess is okay," she replied. I could tell she chose her words carefully.

"What exactly do you mean by that?" I raised a brow, urging for a proper response while an uneasy feeling started to stir within me.

"There were some... complications... in the final stages of her assimilation. Virion is currently looking after her but she has yet to awaken." Her voice was quiet as she spoke.

"Complications?" My voice came out a bit fiercer than I intended it to be.

"You need to understand that the final leg of assimilation is when the Beast Will struggles the hardest. Right now, Tessia and the elderwood guardian are fighting for control. Thus far, there has never been a case where the receiver of the will falls into a coma to this extent. Based on our theory, there seems to be something particular about the Beast Will you gave her, Arthur," replied Goodsky earnestly.

What... was this my fault? I put Tess in danger...? A flurry of thoughts raced through my mind as I tried to think of an explanation as to why such a thing occurred.

There was something particular about the elderwood? What was it? Yeah, it was strong, but was it stronger than other S class mana beasts? I wouldn't know since it had been my first time fighting one.

Particular...?

My mind flashed back to the dungeon, and more specifically, what Alea had told me. She had mentioned that the black-horned demons were causing the monsters to mutate and grow stronger.

Was that what had happened? Had I given Tess a potentially corrupted beast core? No, I couldn't have. I remembered Alea explaining how the beast core of the serpent she defeated had mysteriously disappeared. Shouldn't that have happened to the elderwood guardian's beast core as well then?

"Arthur? Are you okay?" Director Goodsky's concerned voice stirred me from the deep abyss of my thoughts.

"Yeah, just thinking," I voiced as my eyes glazed over at the night view of the city.

"In any case, Virion is currently looking after her in your training room. Would you like to go visit them now?" Director Goodsky gave me a reassuring smile.

"Yeah, I'd like that."

"Mmm... then go on ahead, because even I have not been updated on the situation. Virion has not let anyone in, but I feel like you'd be an exception. I must make a trip to The Council to inform them of what happened." Goodsky suddenly looked infinitely older as she mentioned The Council.

"Is it okay for Grandpa Virion to not be present during the council meeting?" I asked.

Director Goodsky shook her head before replying, "Virion is in no state to be bothered with this matter when his precious granddaughter is currently unconscious. And besides, him being there with Tess is the only reason Alduin and Merial can stand to be away from their daughter and remain with The Council."

"I see. Okay, well I hope you keep me informed on this matter." I made my way to the door.

"My only concern is that you may have to be a lot more involved this time than you'd wish to be." Director Goodsky breathed a sigh before a gust of wind enveloped her and whisked her away.

---

As I made my way down by riding the elevator, Sylvie stirred from her sleep.

'I feel Mama.'

As I walked slowly towards the training room that had been assigned to me, my feet seemed to weigh a lot more than they should. I don't know how I'd react if Tess were injured. The only reason I felt it wasn't necessary to visit everyone else right away was because I assumed everyone would be safe.

'I said, "I feel Mama!"' Sylvie thumped my forehead with her paw.

"I know!" I waved her paw away before turning my focus back to the giant double-door entrance that drew nearer.

“Ouch.” The skin under my dimension ring suddenly burned as if something inside it wanted to come out.

Ignoring it, as I had more pressing matters, I placed both my palms on the surface of the door and pushed it open.

As soon as the door swung open, an unfamiliar sinister aura visibly surged forward in an attempt to trap me. This dark fog felt like thousands of thorny vines as it coiled around my arms and legs.

“WHO’S TH... ARTHUR?” Amidst the noticeably dark wave emanating from a particular focal point, I heard Grandpa Virion’s husky voice boom.

“Yeah, it’s me, Gramps! What’s going on?” I yelled past the sound of what reminded me of the crashing of an ocean’s waves against a cliff.

“God, am I glad you’re still alive, brat. I think I’m becoming somewhat thankful for your cockroach-like tenacity, HAHA! Come over here, I need your help!” Still confused by what was happening, I chose to ignore Gramps’ slightly insulting metaphor and walked carefully towards him. The aura was getting stronger, and I felt my skin start to bleed from small tears, which cut through my clothes.

Willing mana to shield both Sylvie and I, I made my way towards the source of the aura using Grandpa Virion’s hazy figure as a guide; each step felt like I was pushing against a reinforced wall.

“What in the... Tess?!” As I got closer, I could faintly make out the figure, lying in front of Gramps—the source of this aura.

When I finally reached Grandpa Virion, I winced from the searing pain, caused by my dimension ring, that seemed to have gotten stronger. Gramps wasn’t in good shape; his pale face was drenched in sweat as he tried his best to suppress the oppressive aura emanating from Tess to little avail.

I took a closer look and what I saw made my eyes widen in surprise. Tendrils of vines completely enclosed the figure I assumed was Tess. The thick dark aura made it hard for me to make out what it was until now.

“How much time has passed on the outside, brat? I think I’ve been holding in this foul aura for a day or so since she came back from the dungeon.” He gave me a weary chuckle.

“What’s happening to her, Gramps?” I didn’t remember anything like this happening back when I was assimilating with Sylvia’s dragon will.

“Honestly, I’m not sure. Typically, the purpose of assimilation is to enable the host’s body to gradually withstand and control the beast will’s power, but in this case, it seems to be the opposite. I’m beginning to worry that this beast’s will is trying to take over Tess’ body.” Grandpa Virion’s shaking voice was filled with unease.

“How is that possible? I’ve never heard of something like that happening.” My brows furrowed as I contemplated the possible cause. My thoughts kept going back to the mana beasts that had been corrupted by the black-horned demons.

“I’m not so sure, brat. I feel like that Elderwood you fought might’ve been mutated.” Virion’s hoarse voice indicated that he was most likely at his breaking point.

I was ready to take over for Gramps, ignoring the burning sensation from my ring that was evidently growing more painful.

It happened even before my hands touched the surface of the cocoon Tess was in.

I could instantly recognize the sound of flesh tearing as I instinctively shifted my body in hopes to dodge in time.

“KYU!!!” ‘PAPA!’

“OII, ARTHUR!”

Both Sylvie and Virion’s voices sounded muffled through the pounding of my eardrums.

The Beginning After The End – Chapter 75: Order Of Power

A stain of blood began spreading through the remains of my shirt as I barely managed to dodge the spear of twisted vines aimed straight for my heart.

My heart pounded with a force strong enough to break out of my ribcage from the thought of death looming before me. I almost died. This sensation felt different from the other near-death experiences I had had. It was almost instantaneous; I could’ve died in that split second, and it would’ve been because of Tess, no less.

I knew women were dangerous.

Barely dodging the tendril, I grimaced at the feeling of blood trickling down my cheek.

I almost chuckled at the comical situation stirring in my mind. Grandpa Virion’s hands were literally on the cocoon, but as soon as I got near her, a flurry of spear-like vines automatically locked onto me for the kill? I knew that, deep down, Tess was still mad at me.

I parried the next dark, spear-like tendril before things became even worse. The cocoon that wrapped around Tess began expanding as an uncountable number of vines began surfacing from the ground beneath her.

“Kuu!” ‘Papa, you’re okay!’ I heard Sylvie chirp near Gramps.

Grandpa Virion’s shoulders loosened as he let out a sigh of relief. “I thought you almost died, brat. What’s happening now?”

“Yeah, that was... a little too close for comfort, and I honestly have no clue what’s happening now, Gramps. Maybe your granddaughter doesn’t like me so much anymore.” I managed to shoot him a smirk, making him chuckle despite the situation we were in.

After another thick layer of vines intertwined around the existing ones that formed Tess’ cocoon, dozens of tendrils began positioning themselves to, once again, shoot at me. Just me.

“Kuu...” ‘What do we do?’

Sylvie, who was perched next to Grandpa, tilted her head in confusion, since the ‘enemy’ was her ‘mama.’

I want you to stay with Grandpa Virion. She's only aiming at me for some reason.

After dodging the discharge of tendrils, I positioned myself away from Gramps and Sylvie. Gramps was drained of all his mana from suppressing the dark aura for almost two days straight while Sylvie was better off not interfering until I knew exactly what the implications would be.

What's more, 'Tess' was becoming more creative in her attacks; her next wave of tendrils were even laced with sharp thorns. The more I avoided the spears of vines, the more sure I was that the beast will was dead set on trying to kill only me. It also wasn't helping that my ring was burning to an almost unbearable degree.

Could it be that the elderwood guardian's dying will was hoping to gain redemption from me since I was the one that defeated him down in the dungeon? If that really happened to be the case, I hoped I lived long enough to find out.

Frustrated, I withdrew my sword from my dimension ring, but as I did, something else came out with it.

While Dawn's Ballad appeared promptly in my hand, a small shining orb shot out of the ring towards the cocoon.

It was the orb that that homeless storekeeper had given me!

The clear orb, about the size of a marble, sparkled with an array of colors as it bolted towards the enlarging cocoon.

What the hell?

Grandpa Virion noticed it too but he only gazed at me in confusion, probably thinking that I had done it intentionally.

Streaks of light escaped from the crevices in between the vines as the orb sunk into the cocoon.

Before we even had the chance to wonder what was going on, an explosion occurred from within the cocoon, revealing a menacing, naked, black-haired Tess.

As the orb sunk into her stomach where her mana core was, Tess' sickly complexion went back to normal... no, beyond normal. Her now flawless pearl skin seemed to literally radiate as her black hair turned back into its original gunmetal silver hue.

Her physical appearance wasn't the only thing that changed. As the orb disappeared completely inside her abdomen, Tess' unconscious body was completely covered in an aura I had never seen before—distinctly different from the usual mana existent in the atmosphere, in an almost mystical way.

Surrounding her was a scorching flame comprised of brilliant emerald gems. Millions of green, leaf-shaped embers made up this unique aura. As the emerald aura expanded, the once-black vines turned a serene jade green. Even as the mesmerizing aura drew nearer, for some reason, I didn't fear it. Before it reached any of us, the aura shrank back and dissipated.

As Tess' figure fell, I jumped up and took out the coat I used while I was an adventurer, swiftly wrapping it around her bare body as I held her in my arms.

The dark aura that filled the training room was completely gone, and more importantly, Tess was safe.

"Mmm...not now, Arthur. Too soon," Tess mumbled as her face revealed a coquettish smile.

...She was most definitely safe.

"Pfft! Hahahaha!" Relief washing over me, I laughed. I laughed full-heartedly at Tess' sleep talk and just at the fact that she was okay.

"TESSIA!" Grandpa Virion came running with Sylvie dangling from his long white hair.

"She's okay, Gramps. She's just sleeping now." I set her down and fell onto my b\*\*t as all the strength I had left, left me.

Both Sylvie and Gramps began meticulously inspecting the slumbering Tess before they heaved a sigh of relief as well.

"...She is okay." Gramps slumped down next to me while Sylvie curled up next to Tess. For a brief moment, we just blankly stared at the other end of the training grounds, too tired to even think.

"..."

"So did you get a good eyeful?" Turning my head, I could see Grandpa Virion's smirk grow so wide that I was rather surprised his lips didn't tear.

"She's thirteen!" I groaned as I fell back on the soft grass-like moss.

"Almost fourteen," he corrected as he shifted a his softening gaze back towards Tessia.

"I'm glad you're okay, brat. This girl would've been devastated if she found out you hadn't made it..." He paused.

"...And thank you... for saving my granddaughter back at the dungeon, and now." Virion's voice grew softer, almost mumbling, as he said this.

"What makes you think I saved your daughter, Gramps?" I replied without getting up, using my hands to support my head.

"Call it a grandfather's intuition. With your abilities, I know that if you only thought of yourself, you wouldn't have ended up in dangerous situations like these. So again, thank you." The sincerity in his voice was confirmed as his eyes met mine.

"Ugh, forget it. Don't get so serious like that all of a sudden, you're scaring me." I rolled to my side, my back facing Grandpa Virion.

"So when did you get back? Your family knows you're alive, right?" Gramps replied.

"Of course. I got home last night and even spent some time with my family earlier today..."

Silence hovered between us for a few seconds before I spoke again.

“Gramps, I’m sorry. I-I should’ve rushed back. I just assumed that she’d be fine once she woke up since she crossed the last leg of assimilation with her beast will back at the dungeon. If I had known things could go wrong like this, I would’ve rushed here as soon as I got back.” I turned back to look at Virion, almost pleadingly.

Back when I was assimilating with Sylvia’s beast will, I remembered Virion explaining to me how there was one final wave of struggle from the beast will before the assimilation was completely over, how that was normal...

I should’ve prepared for the worst.... I almost lost her today.

This thought scared me a lot more than I would’ve ever believed possible in my past life.

“Your parents probably had their fair shares of worries raising you, huh?” Unexpectedly, Grandpa Virion let out a soft chortle.

“Wha... yeah, I guess,” I responded, thrown off by his sudden question.

“You did good in going to your family first. Tessia has her family to take care of her... she’s not alone, you know. You probably thought of this when you decided to spend the day with them. Your family probably needed you to be there for them as well, since you gave them quite a scare. Don’t forget that and don’t be sorry that you spent that much needed time with your family.” Grandpa Virion patted my back, consolingly.

I didn’t know what to say. I was thankful that he knew me well enough without needing an explanation, or an excuse...

Again, a tranquil silence hung over us until I finally got around to asking the question that had been clawing the back of my mind.

“Hey, Gramps... how much do you know about the Six Lances?” I asked as my gaze focused on Sylvie, who ended up falling asleep, curled up next to Tess.

“...The Six Lances? Why the sudden curiosity?” Virion asked after a while.

I didn’t respond.

“What exactly do you want to know about them?” Accepting my silence, he responded tactfully.

“How strong are they?” After a bit of thought, I started off with a simple question.

He let out a slow, elongated breath. “Brat, let me start by asking you this: how strong do you imagine white core mages to be?”

My brows furrowed as I began calculating how many mages it would take to hold down a single white core mage. Since it took roughly around twenty solid-yellow core mages to hold off a single silver core mage, would it take less silver core mages than that to beat a white core mage... or was the power level increase exponential?

“I’m not really sure, Gramps,” I finally said, defeated.

“To make it easier for you, we’ll use myself as A figure of measurement. I don’t ever recall explicitly telling you this, but I’m a mid-silver core mage. It would take roughly around ten of me to keep one mid-white core mage at bay, and that’s being optimistic.” Grandpa Virion let out a chortle.

“Ten of you...” I muttered under my breath.

“Now, Cynthia is high-silver. Even after being generous, it would take around six or seven of her to keep one mid-white core at bay.” He shrugged as he spoke.

“...”

I couldn’t imagine my current self being able to defeat that many Virions or Goodskys. Perhaps if I were to release the second phase of my dragon’s will, I might be barely able to contend with three Grampa Virions, however, the drawback would be tremendous.

“I don’t get it... where did these abnormally strong figures come from, and why haven’t they decided to just take control of a kingdom? I mean, with their strength, it’s not like any king or queen can give them much of a fight. What’s been keeping the royal family in power when there are white core mages capable of slaughtering them and their armies rather easily?” I asked, trying to make sense of this world’s government system.

“You have an excellent point. You’re right—by strength alone, the Six Lances, or any white core mage for that matter, could probably wipe out a kingdom on their own.” He glanced over at Tess to make sure she was still sleeping.

“Before I say anything more, this will need to be kept an absolute secret from Tessia. I want her to stay ignorant of these rather... dark matters... at least until she’s older.” Grandpa Virion had a tender smile on his face as he looked at his granddaughter.

“Mm. I’ll keep it a secret.” I nodded.

“I’ll explain where they came from after, but the strength of each one of the Six Lances... They are now above that of regular white core mages, but before being knighted, most of them were actually only Silver core mages.” Gramps spoke with a faraway, peaceful expression.

“Huh? That makes no sense...” I was about to rebut.

“Brat, do you think the royal family, without any major powerhouses in line for the throne, could stay in power since the beginning of the three kingdoms?” His peaceful expression disappeared as he peered at me with a face clearly depicting his mixed feelings.

He continued, “This is classified information shared only to the royal families of each respective race, but I’m telling you because, somehow, I know you’ll need this information in the future and I know you’ll be able to handle it...”

He let out a heavy sigh that seemed to contain a bit of his very soul.

“Do you believe in deities?”

The Beginning After The End – Chapter 76: Manifest Destinies

The world of my past, the world where I came from, still often comes to mind. It was a life of isolation for me but it wasn't as if I loathed every moment of my near-forty years there. I especially enjoyed visiting the orphanages and playing with the children. Of course, most of the boys considered sword-fighting and ki training forms of play, so whenever I went, I ended up spending hours teaching them.

I remembered one day rather explicitly, when a boy in the orphanage – ah right, Jacob was his name – asked me a question.

“Brother Grey, do you believe in God?” he had asked, looking up while tugging on my sleeve.

I'd never believed in God, or whatever higher being some of the people believed in. How could there be a god in a world where your level of martial strength determined how you could live your life. Parents who birthed physically weak or crippled babies were considered humiliations, often ridiculed by others behind their backs. Those babies, even if they did grow up to live past adolescence, would never be able to amount to anything. They would have about as much recognition as a fly buzzing in someone's face: annoying, better off dead, useless.

Even a woman, no matter how beautiful and charismatic she was, would only amount to a high-class prostitute if she didn't have at least the minimum strength needed to be considered 'mediocre' amongst practitioners. Even those old bastards in the council, that sat on their asses all day and used everyone like pawns, were once grand fighters and famous figures.

How could a god exist in a world like that? Even if a god or deity existed in my previous world, he certainly wasn't very merciful or loving, let alone fair.

When that child, Jacob, asked me if I believed in God, I couldn't answer. These children believed, like I once did, that there was a higher power watching over them... protecting them.

Again, in this world, I was asked a similar question, but by someone much older than me.

Did I believe in deities...some sort of higher powers that were above us and unreachable?

“...”

“I'm not sure. Do deities exist?” The words '...in this world?' almost slipped from my mouth.

“Haha! I've been asking that question all my life, but I've started to think that deities might still exist,” Grandpa Virion let out a hearty laugh.

“What made you change your mind?” I tilted my head in curiosity.

“Her.” I thought Virion pointed his finger at Tess, but I realized it was the sleeping Sylvie he was directing his gaze at.

“Wait, Sylvie? You think Sylvie is a deity?” Almost choking on my spit, I directed my gaze back at Gramps.

“Brat, deities are different from what religious books say about gods. Deities are beings that are able to ascend from what we consider their mortal bodies and fully harmonize with mana. Dragons, at least, what I've read about them, are beings that can naturally become deities. They can't be classified as just S class, or SS class mana beasts; if you compare it to mana cores, deities would be at the level one would

reach after breaking out of white core stage.” Grandpa Virion looked down at his own two hands as he said this, letting out a scoff.

“Here we are, elves, humans, and dwarves alike, at most, barely able to tap into the power of a white stage mana core. Yet, there may be beings still existing that can easily level mountains and flood valleys... Haaa~” Again, Grandpa Virion had that faraway look.

He closed his eyes for a while before slowly opening them again, his gaze shifting towards me.

“You’ve read about the war between the three races, as well as the most recent war between the humans and elves, but compared to those two wars, this continent was much more chaotic and dangerous in ancient times. The three races were nomadic back then, always on the run from mana beasts. The humans, elves and dwarves all travelled separately due to clashes in appearance and culture, but whenever any of the races met, we were on fairly good terms...we had to be; we exchanged information and traded raw resources that we picked up along the way. This is now known as the Beast Era, where the mana beasts were rampant and ruled the continent.”

“I don’t understand. Why didn’t we use magic to drive the mana beasts away? I could understand maybe avoiding A-class mana beasts and up, but I don’t see why we were so helpless.” My brows furrowed in confusion.

“It’s not that we didn’t, it’s that we couldn’t. Brat, have you ever noticed the painting in the main hall of the Royal Palace in Elenoir?” He suddenly switched topics.

“You mean that enormous painting in the living room? I mean, I noticed it at first but I couldn’t really make sense of it so I just disregarded it.” I let out an awkward laugh, scratching my head.

“Every one of the three Royal Palaces has a painting similar to that one; it is a depiction of a powerful deity gifting us with the tool to overcome the mana beasts and put an end to the Beast Era.” I couldn’t tell how Virion was feeling as he said all this, his expression still a mixture of various emotions.

No matter how ridiculous this sounded to me, Gramps’ tone showed me he wasn’t joking as he said this, so I stayed quiet and let him continue.

“This deity appeared in front of three people, and they were the forefathers of what are now the three royal families. He bestowed our ancestors with six artifacts, which were distributed equally amongst the three ancestors that were chosen by the deity to become kings. For the humans, the head of the Glayder family at that time received two; the dwarves, the head of the Greysunders family received two; and lastly, for the elves, the ancestor of my Eralith family also received two.” Virion couldn’t help but smirk after looking at my expression.

“Huh? Why would this so-called ‘deity’ just give the three races these treasures?” I sputtered incredulously, not able to hold it in.

“Let me get to that, brat,” he reprimanded.

“Remember, this was ages before I was born. This knowledge is passed down from king to king and my guess is that information may have been exaggerated or skewed in certain directions along the way, but this is what I’ve been taught. The three kings weren’t meant to use the three pairs of artifacts bestowed by the deity themselves, but were instead meant to bestow them onto their two most powerful subjects

under a soul oath through a sort of knighting ceremony. With these powerful artifacts given to their strongest warriors, the three races were meant to use the power of the artifacts to protect themselves as well as gain the upper hand in dominating the mana beasts and other ancient monsters of the time," he explained.

"I would assume that giving three races super powerful artifacts just begs for chaos and war, rather than protection. I'm not so sure about the elves, but if you at least look at some of the humans, greed isn't exactly a rare thing," I chortled, shaking my head.

"Well, funny you say that because that's what happened. The artifacts did indeed allow the elves, humans and dwarves to work together during that period to further expand their area of dominance. A lot of the mana beasts were either killed or driven off to what is now known as the Beast Glades, putting an end to the Beast Era. However, shortly after, greed did get ahold of the three kings and their subjects. Besides the incredible power the artifacts gave to its wielders, it gave them insights on how to utilize the source of energy that makes up the world, which we now call mana. With this, the users of the artifacts taught it to those who they deemed capable, thus, giving rise to the very first batch of mages. Drunk on power, the concept of harmony dwindled and soon led to internal strife due to greed," Virion looked at me with a painful smile before continuing.

"The three pairs of artifacts bestowed had different attributes and were divided between the humans, elves and dwarves respectively, segregating us all even further. The distinct features in specialization between the three races we have today are supposedly due to the artifacts. The dwarves, who reasoned that because they were the beings closest to the earth, believed that they should naturally be the rulers of the continent. We elves reasoned that because we were the closest to all living things, we should be the rulers of the continent, while the humans, who were able to train and utilize all of the four major elements, believed that the deity naturally wanted to make them the rulers of the continent." Virion looked back at Tess to make sure she was still asleep.

"The first war, which lasted longer than the time they drove the mana beasts into the Beast Glades, was what led to the segregation of the three races as well as the formation of the three kingdoms. The second war, which you're more familiar with, happened between the humans and the elves. So... going back to the question of where the Six Lances came from, can you take a guess?" he tested.

"Wait... so those six artifacts that were bestowed upon your ancestors by the so-called deity were given to the Six Lances?" y mind raced as pieces of the puzzle began to fit. "And the artifacts are the reason why they were able to rise past the silver core stage and become white core mages, as well as the reason why they aren't able to go against the Council since they are soul-bound, just like the previous users who were tied to the first kings," I exclaimed after coming to a revelation. Everything clicked.

"The Lances were most likely chosen amongst candidates that were brought up closely by the royal family of their respective race, and after they were deemed worthy, they were bestowed the artifact along with the soul oath that bound their lives to the kings," I continued.

"Exactly. They were secretly raised as candidates to each wield an artifact. However, it wasn't until the discovery of another continent that the three races decided that they needed to unify." Grandpa Virion had a distant look on his face as he explained.

“One last question. So were the artifacts given to figures in the past as well? How come we’ve never heard of them?” I was sitting up by this point, thoroughly focused on the conversation and leaning forward as if it were possible to receive information faster this way.

“Yes, but this is the first time they were publicized. In the past, wielders of the artifacts were always protecting the king and his family from the shadows. It is only now, after the unification of the continent that we decided to publicize the wielders. Of course, no one else knows that they got their strength through the power of the artifacts. If that secret were to be let out, it would most likely cause a coup d’etat; the greed of numerous silver core mages desperate to surpass their limits is not to be looked down upon. Who knows to what extent some might go? Maybe even destroying the entire royal bloodline in hopes to be the new masters of the artifacts,” Virion paused again before turning to stare at Sylvie again.

“I imagine your bond has the capability to become a deity. I’m not sure how long that would take and if we’d be even alive when that happens, but Arthur, you need to get stronger. Call it my own senile intuition but I feel like changes are going to happen soon... enormous changes. I just hope that I’m wrong.” This was the first time I’d seen Grandpa Virion have such a worried look on his face.

My mind flashed to the message that Sylvia had left within me after teleporting me to Elshire Forest—how I would hear from her again when I reached the stage past white core. I was beginning to think that maybe these so-called deities weren’t as fictional as I believed them to be.

“Mmmm... what’s going on? Why am I sleeping on the ground?”

The Beginning After The End – Chapter 77: Good To See You

VIRION ERALITH’S POV:

What in the name just happened? What was that bizarre aura around Tessia? What did the boy do anyway?

I was just barely able to see that orb shoot out and get sucked into my granddaughter’s body. It seemed sort of like an elixir, but I wasn’t really able to tell...

Anyway, I was just glad that she was safe now.

I almost felt bad for the boy; he had just crawled back up to the surface after falling into an underground dungeon—gods know how deep—and now he had to deal with all this.

Was I doing the right thing revealing all this information to Arthur?

There was a bitter taste left on my tongue after I finished explaining everything to the boy; I sometimes forgot that he was actually younger than Tessia.

It was odd, though. I couldn’t quite put my finger on it, but more and more, my instincts told me that despite his monstrous ability in mana manipulation and latent potential as a mage, his cognitive acuteness, his mental capacity that didn’t belong to a prepubescent child that would make this brat so scary in the future, currently, his level of power had not caught up to his intellect.

“Mmmm... what’s going on? Why am I sleeping on the ground?”

My ears perked up immediately at the sound of my granddaughter's feeble voice.

"G-Grandpa? Where am... ART!!!!"

My arms were already stretched out wide, ready to embrace my one and only beloved granddaughter, but oddly enough, instead of coming into her grandfather's arms, her body bolted away from me and towards the boy.

My granddaughter... you're going the wrong way.

"ARTHUR!!!! You're alive!!" Tessia almost knocked the boy back down onto the ground from how fast she flew into his arms.

Meanwhile, my arms stayed outstretched.

Maybe the passing breeze would accept my embrace...

ARTHUR LEYWIN'S POV:

As Tess' faint voice reached my ears and her teary eyes locked onto mine, she bit her lower lip to keep herself from breaking down, and I stood there at a loss. A wave of different emotions, half of which I didn't even know I could feel, washed over me.

"ARTHUR!! You're alive!" Her face was already buried in my chest as she finished her sentence.

"Yeah..." — I gently petted her hair — "I'm alive."

I turned to Virion, and I swore I could almost see his petrified body crumbling to bits, his lonely arms stretched out.

His head turned like a badly oiled robot, revealing his gaze, which was anything but automaton by the image he projected.

Traitor.

Grandpa should still come first.

You're dead to me, brat.

These were the thoughts that might as well have been tattooed across his forehead by how blatantly his foul mood was leaking out.

Giving Grandpa Virion a sympathetic smile, I looked back down at Tess, who was still in my arms. Only when my old robe that had been wrapped around her body slipped slightly off her bare shoulder did I remember she was completely naked underneath.

"Kyu!"

Sylvie was bouncing up and down, trying to get Tess' attention as the latter clung onto me like glue, but to no avail.

"The last thing I remember was you handing me over to someone. I can only recall bits and pieces of what happened after because I was in too much pain then. B-But I heard broken pieces of conversations

about how you didn't make it out," she said as her arms still clung onto me like an infant koala. The way she looked up at me with those tear-filled eyes made me almost lose myself.

"I'll fill you in on what happened, but for now"—I peeled her off of me, wrapping her tighter with the only piece of clothing covering her—"let's get you decent, Princess."

"What are you talking..." was all she managed to say before looking down, her eyes widening in horror.

Tess let out a horrified scream that shook the room, and without even the chance to react, Grandpa Virion, Sylvie, and I were knocked back by a surge of mana that seemed to have come out of nowhere.

I managed to recover in time, landing on my feet. As I looked to my side, I saw that Virion and Sylvie were both uninjured. Surprised, but uninjured.

Not even caring about the throbbing pain in my chest, I stared, slack-jawed at the sight before us.

Tess was at the epicenter of a storm of translucent emerald green vines, dozens of meters in length, all snapping and whipping around chaotically. What was even more strange was that it looked more like an extension of the bright green aura surrounding Tess, who was now curled up in the fetal position.

"Th-This... mana formation of this magnitude... shouldn't be possible for her!" Grandpa Virion's stood there, gaping.

"You have got to be kidding me," I mumbled to myself.

Cupping my hands, I yelled out, "Tess! You need to calm down!"

"Shut up, shut up, shut up! Go away! I can't believe you didn't tell me I was n-naked!" she screamed, her eyes still shut tightly in embarrassment. Something told me that those semi-transparent tendrils responded to her emotions because they were swaying even more fiercely right now.

"Didn't you learn that telling a screaming girl to calm down never actually calms her down?" Grandpa Virion said, shaking his head in mock disappointment.

Of course... I'm the ignorant one I guess.

What good was having been a king? Psh... only the strongest in my country? What good does all of that do, Arthur, if you can't even quell the anger of a thirteen-year-old girl?

"Tess! It's your grandfather! Open your eyes!" Virion shouted this time.

"Huh?"

As Tess peeked out from one eye, she finally realized what was happening.

"What's going on? What is all of this?" The flustered Tess looked to us for help.

"Try controlling your emotions, it's making your mana flow go out of control," I tried to explain in a more reasonable tone.

Tess looked to Virion, who was nodding in agreement with me.

As realization dawned on her, Tess closed her eyes and began meditating, and the translucent emerald vines slowly dissipated, fading out of sight.

The three of us rushed to where Tess was curled up as soon as the vines, that seemed to be made up of pure mana, disappeared.

“Quick, Gramps, check her mana core.”

I was going off a hunch, kind of scared to hear the truth.

“That’s just what I was about to do, brat.” Virion rolled up his sleeves and imbued some mana into his palms.

“Wait! Art, turn around!” Tess was obviously out of breath but she was also aware that something was different with her body.

“Sigh... I already saw everyth—”

“NOW!”

“—yes ma’am.”

“Psh...former king? More like whipped dog,” I mumbled to myself as I turned my back to them.

“I-It can’t be... Ha ha ha... W-What in the world?” I heard Virion’s trembling voice.

“What? What is it? What stage is her core at, Gramps? Dark yellow? Don’t tell me... she’s at solid yellow like me?” I was itching to turn around.

“Half a step away from Initial Silver. She almost broke through into the initial silver stage.”

“What?” I whipped my head back, causing Tess to wrap the robe covering her even more tightly.

Ignoring Tess’ glare and protests, I put my hand on her abdomen... over the robe.

He was right... Even when sensing directly, I couldn’t recognize the extent of her mana core, which meant she was at a higher level than I was.

Both Gramps and I fell straight to our bums in utter disbelief.

She broke through out of Light Orange and into the Dark Yellow stage not too long ago. That meant she skipped through all of Yellow and straight into Initial Silver?

This gravity-defying news was hard for me to swallow. I took my body’s composition for granted; because I was a quadra-elemental mage, it was a lot easier for me to break through, but it had become distinctively harder to get past bottlenecks once I reached the Dark Yellow stage. Not to mention the fact that I broke through at age 3—much earlier than everyone else.

The “gifted” students in this academy have ten years to pass the final exam in order to graduate. There was no set stage that a student’s core had to reach in this time but on average, alumni tended to be around Light Orange stage by the time they graduated. After reaching that stage, they would be given a seat among the upper echelons of practically anywhere they went.

For even the most talented dual-elemental mages, it should take exponentially longer for them to make breakthroughs if at all, but Tess had just been able to break that common sense and skip straight past the threshold just before breaking into the Initial Silver stage. That was potentially a couple decades of cultivation condensed into a mere fortnight...

The absurdity of it all...

“What the hell did you give her, brat?” Virion asked. “I’ve never heard of a beast will tempering a mana core. Or did it perhaps have anything to do with that orb you threw at her?”

“Grandpa, what did you mean by ‘half a step away’? What orb?” Tess echoed, puzzled by our conversation.

“I-I thought it was just some kind of elixir...” I was at a loss for words.

What the hell was that vanishing elixir shop?

“Arthur, if there ever was such an elixir that could do what that orb did just now, wars would break loose in hopes to win it,” Grandpa Virion shook his head, still in shock as he imagined everything he’d just told me. “How did you get your hands on whatever orb that was anyway?”

Oh, you know, I got it from a homeless-looking fellow that owned a disappearing Elixir shop...

“Ha ha ha haha... I got it for a silver coin, Gramps.”

Virion gawked at me incredulously. By his expression, I bet he would’ve been less surprised if I told him I stole it from a god.

“I don’t exactly know myself. I kinda got that orb from a peddler but that’s as much as I know...” I let out another small laugh in helplessness.

“Can you tell me what’s going on? You guys weren’t actually being serious right?” Tess immediately began focusing on her mana core. “No way... m-my mana core is light yellow now... and it already has so many cracks on it,” she said as her voice trembled.

“H-Honey... you’re actually a peak light yellow core mage now,” Grandpa Virion mumbled, almost whispering.

Tess’ eyes rolled back as she fainted, her body slumped against Sylvie’s back as my bond moved just in time to catch her.

“This girl just can’t stay awake...” I grumbled as I positioned her more comfortably on the grass floor.

“She’s sure to be exhausted after having gone through all of this; her body was under constant stress, and breaking through more than three stages at once took a toll on her mind as well. I guess the realization was the tipping point.” Virion let out a chuckle as he picked her up.

“I’m going to take her back to Elenoir through the gate. She needs some rest, and I’m sure my son and daughter-in-law are still worried. Kukuku, I’m kind of looking forward to how they’ll react to this. Sigh~ Imagine... Princess Tessia, a silver core mage at the age of 13,” he boasted with a wide grin on his face. “Do you want to come with me?”

“I’ll pass on that. I know Tess is safe, and she knows I’m safe as well; that’ll have to do for now. We’ll catch up when she returns to school,” I replied.

“Mm. I have a meeting with The Council that I’ve been avoiding ’til now, so I won’t get to see you for a while. Get some rest, boy.” Grandpa Virion threw me a wink and walked out of the training room with Tess in tow.

She was at a higher level than me now...

My mind kept going back to the homeless man and his elixir shop. Was the orb he gave me really the reason she was able to break through like that? There wasn’t any other explanation otherwise.

“Kyu~” ‘Papa, I’m hungry!’ Sylvie hopped back onto the top of my head and kept thumping my forehead in complaint.

“Haha, me too, Sylv. But before we go back, let’s visit your Uncle Elijah,” I replied, rubbing my bond’s ears.

“Kuu...” ‘...But, food.’

The Beginning After The End – Chapter 78: Allies?

CYNTHIA GOODSKY’S POV:

Standing before the heavy iron doors, I took a deep breath. Beyond this entrance were the six former kings and queens of this continent. It wasn’t their titles that were making me apprehensive, but more so the fact that they were ultimately the ones who would shape or destroy the future of this continent.

Even with an augmented hearing spell, I was unable to clearly hear what was being discussed on the other side, leaving me to wonder what their course of action might be.

What was I to tell them?

What was I able to tell them? I truly had to be meticulous in the words and actions I used.

I’d only gotten a glimpse of the consequences I would face if I didn’t abide and I knew there was no way around it.

It just wasn’t worth it...not at this point.

Was there really no other way to avoid this? Was I to just sit and watch this peaceful continent that I’d grown to love crumble without being able to do anything?

It couldn’t be helped; I’d deviated too far from what I was originally supposed to do.

My hopes in establishing myself and the foundations of Xyrus Academy up to what it was today was for the sake of this continent. That we might have some hope...

It’d been too long since the time of war, though. Students wanted to get strong; not to protect and fight for what was right but for their own conceited pride. It’d been an ongoing struggle to not only shape up the level of magic in this continent, but also instill proper values.

The only thing I could do for this country now was prepare the next generation as well as get rid of anything that might hinder their plans. I'd been personally getting rid of more and more spies that were being sent out from my homeland.

They were getting impatient. I could tell by some of the toxic traces affecting the dungeons that they were beginning their next phase.

It was beginning to become rather difficult for me to keep up my current pace, though. I could tell Arthur was becoming rather suspicious at times. I had been careless in exposing the wound I received from one of the affected mana beasts.

I was just not sure anymore...

Was I doing the right thing? Would what I was doing even give us a chance?

I once thought so, but I wasn't so optimistic anymore.

Sigh...

The two mages standing guard on either side of the door were carefully observing me, probably wondering why I wasn't going in. I noticed one was at the Initial Silver core stage while the other, slightly thinner mage, was at the Mid-Silver core stage; they would be considered peaks in this continent, but only in this continent.

I signaled to the guards that I was ready to go inside, letting them inform The Council.

"You may enter," the knights announced, opening the doors fully.

"—AND I SAID THAT WE CAN'T JUST BE LYING HERE ON OUR ASSES WAITING FOR MORE DEATHS! ALDUIN, MERIAL, WHY AREN'T YOU SAYING ANYTHING?! ONE OF YOUR LANCES IS DEAD!" I saw Dawsid Greysunders, former king of the dwarves, standing up with his finger pointed at Alduin Eralith, former king of the elves, who was seated with his arms crossed and eyes closed.

"Calm yourself, Dawsid. Before we rashly try and hunt down whoever or whatever killed Alea, we need more information. This might be somehow linked to the communication failures with the Dicateous. What if, like we suspected, the unknown continent is involved and we end up... Ah, Director Goodsky. We received your sound transmission; please, have a seat." Blaine Glayder, the former king of the humans stretched his arm to direct me to a nearby empty seat.

"Yes, but it seems that my message was unnecessary," I responded while taking a small bow before sitting down. King Greysunders also reluctantly took a seat in the chair that seemed a bit too big for him.

"Yes, Alduin was alerted almost immediately after Alea passed; unfortunately, we have no way of knowing how she was killed. Do you happen to know anything, Director Cynthia?" Merial Eralith, former queen of the elves, as well as the mother of my only disciple, asked me.

I should've realized that they might've already known thanks to those bestowed artifacts I was informed about.

"I apologize. Truth be told, I was not the one that found her body." Taking out the adamantium tag that belonged to Alea, I handed it over to Lady Eralith.

“Who was it that found her body? We need to bring that person here.” Glaundera Greysunders, former queen of the dwarves, slammed her palms on the table we were situated around.

“That... may be a bit troublesome,” I said, hesitantly. “You see, the person that found her body was one of my students, and that was only by accident.”

“No matter! Just bring that student here. We need as much detail about this disaster as possible before we can start slowly unfolding it to the public,” Lady Greysunders continued.

“I ensure you that the student does not know any more than what we might be able to guess. This student simply stumbled into the scene after the battle was long over,” I replied while shaking my head.

“Still, are you sure he wasn’t hiding anything from you?” King Eralith spoke up solemnly.

“This student is but a child that recently enrolled. He has no reason to hide any details from me. I fear he will only be more intimidated if we brought him here, causing him to make up details to gain The Council’s favor,” I lied.

I didn’t want to involve Arthur in all of this. Not yet. He wasn’t ready.

“Cynthia offers a valid point. There’s no use interrogating a student that might make up facts to feel like a hero. Besides, she already questioned the student,” Priscilla Glayder, former queen of the humans, defended.

“Yes, I was even able to find the scene of Ale...Code Aureate’s death,” I hurriedly replied. Maybe they would be able to find something. Indirectly helping them like this might prove to be fruitful.

The plan that I was informed of before I had come here seemed to have hastened for some reason, but I knew for a fact that it would still take years before the first course were to come to fruition. Until then, I had to somehow indirectly help them prepare for whatever was coming. Hopefully, I had enough time.

“All right. Then the next course of action is settled.” King Glayder motioned for a secretary to come.

“Dispatch our best tracking mages. We’ll have them find any sort of evidence that the perpetrator might’ve left. In the meantime, what is the current status of the remaining Lances?”

“Yes, Your Highness, our best trackers are already assembled and ready. As for the Lances, Codes Zero, Ohmwrecker, and Balrog were the first to arrive. We’ve received word that Code Thunderlord and Code Phantasm entered the premise not too long ago,” the secretary hurriedly announced with his head bowed.

“Good. We’ll update them soon. Until then, make sure not a single word gets out that one of the Lances was killed,” King Glayder finished his statement while looking at me.

“Rest assured, the student is not the type to let this information out so easily. I will be sure to make it of utmost importance that he keeps the information he has a secret,” I answered back at The Council that was waiting for me to respond.

After I was escorted out, Lady Eralith followed along and pulled me aside, away from everyone’s view. “Director Cynthia. How’s my Tessia? I’ve yet to hear back from my father-in-law,” her voice quaked with concern.

I shook my head. "I was not updated with the situation either. However, Tessia has both Arthur and Virion looking after her. She should be okay, Merial."

"Mm, I hope so. I've barely been able to focus on everything going on because of Tessia's condition. Let me know as soon as you're updated. This way, at least Alduin and I will have the peace of mind to focus on this mess," she says while handing me a sound transmission scroll.

Sound transmission devices were exceedingly costly so most did not have access to one, but The Council always had these in stock to send and receive information quickly.

"I'll be sure to tell you as soon as I find out." I gave her a reassuring smile before letting her go back to the meeting hall.

Five silhouettes could be seen waiting in the dimly lit chamber on the bottom-most floor. Although the shadows covered the five's faces, their voices could be clearly heard.

"So Alea died already?" a well-built man scoffed as he leaned against the back wall with crossed arms.

"Bairon... watch your tone," an authoritative, icy voice rang from a proportioned slender figure sitting with one leg over the other.

"It can't be helped that I'm irritated; her dying so pathetically is trampling on the Lances' name," the man replied.

"Poor Alea. Mica feels bad for her," a sweet voice chimed from a figure whose body resembled that of a child.

"Me too. I'll miss sharing cream puffs with Alea..." sighed a woman, whose seductive figure could not be hidden by the shadows.

"It's improper to pity a General Alea. She died a lance's death after all," a gruff voice sounded from another figure.

The Beginning After The End – Chapter 79: Meanwhile

ARTHUR LEYWIN'S POV:

"Hey, Art. I thought we were heading to your home; where're we going?" Elijah turned to me after noticing we'd taken a different turn on the way back to Helstea Manor.

"There's a place I need to stop by first. Don't worry, it'll be a quick detour," I answered, quickening my pace even with Sylvie on my head.

Elijah broke into a jog behind me. "Wait up!"

When we reached the destination, I couldn't help but let out a disappointed breath, my shoulders dropping.

"I thought so," I mumbled to myself.

"Xyrus Elixirs? Did you need to buy something from here? It's almost midnight; of course it's closed." Elijah cupped his eyes over the front glass door, hoping to spot someone inside.

“It’s nothing. Let’s head back home,” I replied. As I was about to turn away from the building, a shiny object, caught in the crevice of the aged alley leading to Xyrus Elixirs, caught my attention.

As I kneeled down to retrieve it, my eyes narrowed. It was an orb similar to the one used on Tess, except, instead of rainbow speckles inside, there were golden flakes floating within. Attached to the small marble-sized orb was a crudely written note:

Your little Princess will probably need this

“What are you staring so intently at?” Elijah leaned over my shoulder to see.

I crumpled up the piece of parchment and quickly shoved the orb inside my dimension ring.

“Let’s head back home first, Elijah. I’ll need to tell my family that I might have to miss a couple more days of school. Go back to the academy tomorrow and tell everyone that I’m okay.” I patted my best friend’s shoulder and gave him a reassuring smile in response to his concerned expression.

“Don’t worry, I’ll tell you about everything after.” With that, Elijah gave me an accepting nod back.

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#### KATHYLN GLAYDER’S POV:

After finding out what had happened down at the dungeon from my brother, I was shocked. I almost wanted to blame him, to blame Professor Glory, to blame someone but I knew it wasn’t anyone’s fault.

Arthur is going to be okay, right? He’s just that type of person. No matter what situation comes up, he always returns with that lazy smile on his face that, for some reason, calms me.

“You’re being foolish, Kathyln,” I berated myself as I walked down the marble street to the disciplinary committee room. My thoughts lingered on Arthur as I imagined his grateful expression after heroically saving him... had I been there.

I shook my head, trying to snap out of my delusions. “No, no. It’s not my job to look after him. Besides, he already has the student council president.”

A few faint giggles from students passing nearby sent blood rushing up to my cheeks as I veered in another direction.

I’m confident that he’ll be okay! I convinced myself. I’m sure of it...

“Gah!” I heaved out before I quickly covered my mouth, surprised that I’d let out such a barbaric sound. After checking that I was alone in the alleyway between two buildings—a shortcut I had discovered to the disciplinary committee room—I exhaled a sharp breath of relief.

Maybe it was from the stress these days as a disciplinary committee officer. I had assumed things would stay quiet after the formation of the committee—almost to the point of wondering if we were even needed—but recently some unforeseen circumstances had been brought to our attention.

Claire Bladeheart, our leader, pulled each of us aside a few days ago. While explaining the cause, she implied that Arthur was an undeniable factor that led to this.

I wanted to rebut then, but I decided to hear her out. Claire had been secretly gathering information with Kai, who specialized in stealth. From what she'd explained, it seemed that there was a radical group dissatisfied with the direction the academy was heading toward recently.

This group was made up of only humans, and from the few faces that Kai was able to catch a glimpse of, they were all from rather high-up noble families.

One particular noble that had been spotted was named Charles Ravenpor. His father was on rather close terms with mine, but strictly for business. Father would always grumble in dissatisfaction after having a meeting with Mr. Ravenpor because of how ill-mannered and self-centered he was.

While I was jealous of Claire's unwavering confidence that Arthur was still alive, she was also relieved that Arthur wasn't here at the moment because he was supposedly one of the main reasons this radical cult-like group had started. There was a big faction from this group that thought Arthur did not belong in this academy because of his "humble" background. The fact that he was a professor on top of having the privilege of taking upper division classes fueled the already built-in hatred that some of the envious royal students had.

We weren't allowed to confront them as of yet because of the lack of evidence, and the fact that they hadn't really done anything bad yet, but from the looks of it, there were even some professors of this academy supporting them, making it all the more difficult to rashly make a move.

It wasn't until a few days ago, though, that some of the radical group members started to act. Denton, one of my classmates that shared the same period in Arth—Professor Leywin's class, was the victim. He had actually been one of the students that strongly opposed Professor Leywin teaching a class that was so important in building foundations as this. However, he'd warmed up to him—rather, he looked up to him now.

Hopping up on a storage crate to clear the fence, I looked down at the isolated building of the disciplinary committee. Looking behind, I could see the tip of the statue where Denton had just been found three days ago, battered and naked while hung upside down, for all of the passing students to see, a note covering his privates instructing him to drop out of the 'plebeian's class' if he didn't want this to happen again.

It turned out that he had been taken to one of the narrow alleys between the back buildings and beaten up by the radical group. From what Claire told me, they wanted to "teach" him how to properly use mana, since they didn't really think Arthur was be good enough to nurture the "potential" that he had. Denton ended up becoming a target d\*\*\*y for various spells when he resisted.

Director Goodsky was still away so her assistant, Tricia, and Professor Glory had ended up pulling him down and making sure he was okay.

Since then, having no choice but to act on behalf of Director Goodsky, Tricia had been trying to quell the anger from various elven and dwarven parents who thought this had to do with racial discrimination since the victim was an elf.

Needless to say, Denton was taking a break from school for the time being.

Why was this happening? What was the point of doing this? What good did dividing students like this do? Did these students have such low self-esteem that they needed to bring down anyone they thought was better than them to feel better about themselves? Why was it that the more power and privileges someone had, the more greedy they became?

Was it naive of me to wish for everyone to just work together for our continent?

To top it off, a dark and gloomy atmosphere had clung to the disciplinary committee room since the accident with Arthur. Claire and my brother hadn't spoken at first, the both of them blaming themselves, while everyone remained frustrated because our actions were so restricted. Now, everyone was on high alert; all of the disciplinary committee upperclassmen were out for surveillance during the morning and afternoon while Feyrith and I took watch in the evening, with one of the upperclassmen helping us out instead of going to class.

Kai tried to find out their meeting spots but as soon as he had a lead, those places would always change. It seemed as if they were always one step ahead of us, always relocating to someplace new.

The professors were useless. Most of them were all talk in front of the dissatisfied elven and dwarven parents, saying they'd do their best to find the culprit, but not being able to take direct action because the human parents were also dissatisfied due to their children being accused of racial discrimination.

In the end, the professors were too tied in their little game of tug-of-war to be of much help. As they tried hard to be on both sides, they ended up being on neither.

That was the problem with a school so heavily funded by the parents of the students. The only one that had the authority to oppose them directly and openly was Director Goodsky, and she was nowhere to be seen.

It seemed as if her disappearance had allowed this radical group to now openly create a disturbance... because she wasn't here to stop them.

I finally made it to the disciplinary committee room and walked up the stairs, the echo of Claire's voice getting louder the closer I got.

"Things are escalating faster than we thought. I had a feeling that this would be the case—the group is trying to create as much of an uproar before Director Goodsky gets back and then go into hiding temporarily after," Claire announced while leaning forward with her arms on the table. The dark bags underneath her eyes told me she hadn't rested since getting back.

I took a seat after everyone acknowledged me with a nod, too frustrated to verbally greet me. I couldn't help but notice it—the seat where Arthur usually sat, empty. But now wasn't the time to brood. I turned my attention back to the group just as my brother began to speak.

"I talked to multiple professors about the situation like you asked, but it seems you were right. None of them were willing to actively help in finding the crux of the problem. They're turning a blind eye to all of this because of our 'lack of evidence,'" my brother reported through gritted teeth, running his fingers through his hair.

“We already know who one of the members of the groups are so why not just take that rat out and interrogate him? I doubt he has the b\*\*\*s to last even a couple of minutes before spilling out some secrets,” grunted Doradrea while leaning back in her chair.

“Already tried that but Charles Ravenpor is never by himself these days; he’s always surrounded by at least five lackeys. It’ll be impossible to take action secretly with them there. Besides, we need to think about our actions from the entire academy’s perspective. No matter how many things we could get away with, it wouldn’t look good if a student was just taken in by us without proper reason,” Kai argued, shaking his head.

Theodore pounded his fist on the table, tipping over a cup of water. “What the hell is the point of having something like the Disciplinary Committee if we can’t do anything in cases like this?”

“It can’t be helped. We know too little about what this group is planning on doing and more importantly, what they’re capable of. We have too little information on them and it doesn’t seem like there’s only a few of them,” Claire sighed as she sat back down.

“...We need to wait for Director Goodsky to come back,” I said.

“Of course that would be the best thing to do, but we have no idea where she is let alone when she’ll come back,” our leader responded.

“If only Arthur was here,” I mumbled aloud.

I immediately regretted what I said as my brother’s expression turned crestfallen as I mentioned him. They were both there and they were trying to stay strong. After getting the students back to the hospital, my brother told me that Professor Glory was planning on going back down with a reconnaissance team to look for Arthur. She’d said that there’s a high probability that he was still alive if he survived the fall because most likely, all of the mana beasts in the dungeon were on the first floor.

“Kat, I’m sorry, but we just can’t factor in Arthur as an element.” My brother tried his best to fake a smile.

“...He’ll come soon.” I must’ve said this aloud by mistake because everyone, even Theodore, gave me a pained look.

“Umm, excuse me?”

Every one of the Disciplinary Committee members, including myself, whipped our heads at the unexpected voice coming from the first floor of the room.

It was Arthur’s best friend, Elijah.

“Ah, you’re Arthur’s close friend, right?” Claire, who immediately softened her expression, motioned him upstairs.

“Yes, I’m sorry for intruding. I got to school a bit later than I expected but it’s great that you guys are all here. Listen, I know you guys are worried about Ar—”

Arthur’s friend was cut off by a series of thunderous explosions that shook even the reinforced walls of this room.

## The Beginning After The End – Chapter 80: Meanwhile II

ELIJAH KNIGHT'S POV:

Holy c\*\*p...

What the hell is going on? All I did was miss half a day of school; suddenly Denton gets hung up, b\*\*t-naked, and now a building's on fire?

We had all just rushed out of the disciplinary committee room after hearing the explosion. Initially I thought that it was a spell gone wrong or something of that nature, but...

This looked more like a purposeful act of terrorism.

Who would do this? Why would someone do this? What was going on?

"D\*\*n! It's them again," I overheard Theodore say, as if he'd predicted this.

The 'them' that Theodore was talking about—was he possibly referring to the same people that beat and humiliated Denton?

KATHYLN GLAYDER'S POV:

I remembered one time being lectured as a child by my home instructor. I had little memory of why I was chastised, but from what I was told, I had refused to participate in class with some of the other nobles' children; apparently, my mother had thought it was a good idea for me to make friends while I was learning.

That hadn't work out as smoothly as she had hoped it would because I ended up throwing a tantrum on the first day, saying that I didn't want to make friends with them because they weren't princesses like me.

Ignoring the kindly knitted words of discipline from the home instructor, I had barged into my room and slammed the door shut, refusing to come out.

Later that afternoon, after the other noble children and home instructor had left, my mother knocked on the door even though there was no lock.

She sat down next to me on my bed and ran her fingers gently through my hair; even though I couldn't remember how I responded, what she had said to me left such a lasting impression that, even as a six-year-old, I can still almost recall her exact words:

"My little Kathyln, I know you think you did nothing wrong; everyone gets angry and fights for what they believe in. What I want you to know, my little baby, is that before you are a princess, you are a person. It doesn't matter if it's a king, a servant, a powerful mage, an elf or a dwarf. A person is a person.

"Everyone is different and that is what makes everyone special in their own ways. Don't hate someone for something that they can't change. What if people didn't like you because you have round ears or because you have beautiful white skin? Or a perky little nose?"

She proceeded to tickle me in each of the parts she mentioned, leaving me in a fit of giggles.

My mother was sensible and smart but not in the least bit cold like her appearance sometimes implied. She cared for everyone as people, not as humans, elves, or dwarves. She disciplined my brother and me heavily when it came to any type of discrimination, whether it was by social classes or race.

At the sound of the explosions, all of us bolted up from our seats and immediately headed outside. I couldn't help but cringe, tightening my fists in both frustration and disappointment upon seeing the disastrous scene laid out before us.

There was a thick cloud of smoke rising from the area near the center of the campus.

Behind me, I could hear Claire click her tongue as she continued to mutter a string of curses under her breath.

Half of the recently-constructed building was up in flames while the other half was crumbling down, collapsing beneath its own weight. There were students evacuating out of the building while some capable staff members and professors nearby were already going into the building to look for those stranded or stuck.

"I should've known they would aim for this building at some point," Theodore swore aloud as he stomped his foot into the ground.

We hurriedly made our way to the site.

This building was named Tri-Union Hall. It served as both a museum and a monument for the alliance between the three races. My mother, who argued heavily to persuade the rest of the Council to e\*\*\*t this building was the happiest when it was first built.

She had explained to me that it had been built to be both a symbol as well as a place for the three races to learn about the differences in each other's cultures.

For it to have been a target, my assumption could also only lean towards the same radical group that had been creating a mess these days.

I strained my eyes, holding my tears back.

Claire ordered Kai to alert the rest of the professors and staff. When she ordered Feyrith and I to help the mages who were already there to put out the fire before it brought down the whole building, I couldn't help but notice his expression turning from angry to dejected.

I almost wanted to apologize, as if it was my fault. Doradrea didn't seem to take this whole event to heart but I could tell Feyrith wasn't as emotionally strong. I wanted him to know that not all humans thought like this but somehow the words got caught in my throat. I was never good at expressing my thoughts like my mother... or Arthur.

While supporting the professors that went inside the collapsing building, I spotted the Student Council, minus the president, making their way towards the scene as well.

Without even the time to exchange hellos, we all got to work. The water attribute mages helped put out the fire while earth and wind attribute mages kept the building from collapsing. A couple of other student mages were already chanting spells in harmony by the time we got there.

I haven't used water attribute spells as frequently after becoming accustomed to using the more powerful ice attribute ones but I was still fairly familiar with the spells because of the affinity they had for each other.

"Everyone, step aside!" From behind, a couple of professors were rushing toward us, wands already unsheathed.

After a few moments of mute chanting, one of the professors that taught an upper division magic warfare class, Professor Malkenheim, conjured a thick cloud of mist around the whole building.

The other professor, one that I didn't recognize, supported Professor Malkenheim and used the moisture from the mist cloud, which now surrounded the building, to evoke multiple water streams. The size of these two spells from just two professors were more than three times that of the meticulously prepared spells conjured by over ten students.

Within ten minutes, the monstrous fire was out and other professors were rushing inside while chanting spells which raised support beams made of earth to hold up the crumbling portion of the building.

As expected of professors... they were on a different level.

This train of thought led me to be reminded of the time Arthur had completely overwhelmed Professor Geist before taking over his class. Just how strong was Arthur then? What would he do in this situation?

Shaking my head, I reprimanded myself for thinking of Arthur again. Why did he pop into my mind so often? I needed to stay strong for when he comes back.

He was going to come back, right?

I began chanting again when I spotted a group of students hastily making their way out of the scene. I thought nothing of it at first until I got a glimpse of the student within the group—it was Charles Ravenpor.

Even from this distance, I could tell he was nervously darting his eyes around as he made his escape from the scene. When his eyes met mine, he quickly whipped his head around and quickened his pace.

Before I had the chance to do something, Theodore, who had been helping an injured student, spotted him as well, and without even a word, augmented his body before furiously dashing towards Charles.

"Someone help!" Charles shrieked. Unexpectedly, the group surrounding him did nothing to aid Charles, as he was easily grabbed and picked up by the collar, almost choking; instead, they acted frightened and confused.

Keeping my wand at the ready, I followed behind my brother who was also rushing towards Theodore and Charles.

"We need to ask you a couple of questions. If you would so kindly cut the c\*\*p and come with us," growled Theodore as he dragged the flailing Charles.

I usually didn't condone Theodore's rash behaviors, but this time—excuse me for these crude thoughts—I was hoping he would be a bit rougher with Charles. A small part of me, a very tiny part,

wanted to stoop down to their level and use the same barbaric antics the radical group had to make a statement.

However, before Theodore had the chance to do anything else, a voice interrupted us.

“What’s the meaning of this?!” Professor Malkenheim barked as he blocked Theodore’s path.

Professor Malkenheim was of a scrawny build, with his main features being a balding head and a beak-like nose. You could tell the professor was rather conscious of his lack of hair by how he combed back the hairs growing on his side to try and cover up the bald spot on the crown of his head.

Professor Malkenheim wouldn’t physically be able to hold someone as thickly built as Theodore down, but he had his needle-thin wand pointed directly at Theodore.

“I should be asking you the same thing, Professor!” Theodore snarled back as Charles, who was helplessly lying on the floor, wore a pleading look on his face.

“I wasn’t aware that the prestigious disciplinary committee officers were mere thugs that would try to drag an innocent student away,” Professor Malkenheim reprimanded as his wand remained fixed on Theodore.

“Innocent? Ha! This brat has been seen multiple times with the radical group you’ve been having such a hard time capturing. It can hardly be anything short of guilt by association. What, are you protecting a criminal right now?” I could tell Theodore was at his last straw as the ground underneath him started crumbling from his gravity infused mana.

“S-Someone save me from this brute! I’m innocent! I s-swear!” Charles, who was still on the ground trapped in Theodore’s grasp, started whimpering as the ground underneath him started giving out as well.

“Theodore, I understand how you feel, but this isn’t the right way to do things. Taking in a student without any evidence besides your word will lead to repercussions from parents and maybe even the Council. Please, we can’t afford to be rash right now.” The voice came from another professor who’d helped extinguish the flames; she got in between Professor Malkenheim and Theodore, trying to quell the tension.

“Professor Genert is right. Theodore, we can’t go out of line right now. Too much is at stake to be reckless. Besides, there are more important things to do than this. We need to make sure that no one had been left inside that building,” Curtis said, his face a mixture of frustration and helplessness.

Wordlessly, Theodore threw the quivering Charles Ravenpor back toward his groupies and shot Professor Malkenheim one last threatening look before walking away. Professor Malkenheim just clicked his tongue in response and walked in the other direction after yelling at the students who were spectating to disperse.

I shifted my glance towards Charles Ravenpor, who was getting carried away by his friends. His disheveled bangs were covering most of his face but there was an unmistakable smirk plastered below his nose.