

After The End 81

The Beginning After The End – Chapter 81: Meanwhile III

ARTHUR LEYWIN'S POV:

The night before~

“Do you really have to leave again? You just got here.” My mother heaved a sigh as she looked at me from the other side of the dining table.

“Brother, you’re going away again? Are you going to almost die again?” my sister asked with a straight face, making her latter question sting all the more. I could tell she was pouting by how her left cheek slightly puffed out more than usual despite her trying to keep a poker face.

“Eleanor! Don’t say such things to your brother,” my mother chastised as she pinched my sister’s cheek.

“Arthur, I consider you grown up now. I know that your decisions were made in consideration of your family. Father supports your decision to go... since it’s for the sake of your love,” my father affirmed as he gave me a thumbs up, the edges of his lips curling upward.

“Oh God, Dad, please stop,” I groaned at the misunderstanding of being taken as some kind of hormone-induced pubescent that had just been caught with a girlfriend.

“Hehe!” A giggle escaped from my mother’s lips. Despite her efforts to try and quickly cover her mouth and resume a serious face, it was already too late.

I could feel my face burning so I just looked down, shaking my head, unsure of which was worse: my parents worrying about me, or them teasing me like this.

Meanwhile, Elijah quietly sat next to me, wide-eyed, sucking his lips in to make sure he didn’t laugh as well; his expression seemed to to be saying, ‘I’m not doing anything wrong. Nope!’ making me sigh all the harder.

“Kyu!” ‘Papa will be fine! I’m going to protect him this time!’ Sylvie hopped up and down on top of the table.

“It’s only going to take a couple of days, and I’ll be with Grandpa Virion. Nesides, next week is the Aurora Constellate, so I’ll be back home for a while. Like I said in the beginning, this matter is serious,” I tried convincing my parents who were already lost in their own imaginations.

“Well, we can’t keep babying you forever. You are growing up, I guess, in more ways than one. Just remember that it’s better to take things slow, Art. Though, I’m sure you’ll at least do better than your father,” my mother mused as she looked helplessly at my father who got caught off guard by this surprise attack.

My father, who had been doing his best in both his duty as a guard instructor and in his training, looked like he was just stabbed as the teasing comments pierced through his body.

I couldn't help but give them a wry smile before looking at Elijah.

"Don't worry, I'll let everyone know that you're still alive and coming back soon," Elijah responded as he put his hand on my shoulder while giving me a rather dubious thumbs up.

"I will be back soon," I reiterated while letting out a doubtful breath.

I stood up, giving each of them a final hug, which had become a sort of customary thing to do in our family. Sylvie, who was caught in my sister's grasp, struggled to break free.

Taking a quick glance at both my mother and sister, I made sure they still had the Phoenix Wyrms necklaces on them just in case.

Seeing the white-gold chains twinkle around their necks, I said one last goodbye to all of them and went into the carriage waiting for me outside, Sylvie scampering behind me.

Inside the well-suspended carriage pulled by a large horse, I began fiddling with the gold-speckled orb, trying to glean what exactly it was.

Every time I tried imbuing mana into the orb though, there wasn't any sort of response or reaction, almost as if it was just what it appeared to be... a marble.

Clicking my tongue in frustration, I put the orb back inside my ring. The ride to the teleportation gate would most likely be the only time I would have to get some sleep so I tried to make the most of it.

It is necessary, King Grey...

It is of utmost importance to bring stability to our country...

To show the people of our country, YOUR country, that you are their King and that you fight for us, it is necessary to kill her...

Kill her, King Grey, so that the world will know not to trifle with your country...

Kill her...

I shot up from the carriage seat, gasping for air. The sound of my pounding heart hammered all the way up to my head and I felt the cold air, which leaked inside the carriage, against my sweat-filled forehead. It took me a bit to realize that I had just been dreaming. Sinking back down into my seat, I wiped the cold sweat off my brows as Sylvie, who must've fallen off of me when I woke up, jumped back onto my lap with a worried gaze.

As I squeezed my eyes shut, hoping that would help me get rid of the disturbing memory I had forgotten for a while, I felt Sylvie's rough tongue on the back of my hand.

"It's okay, Sylv. I'm fine," I assured her while petting her ears.

Why did that memory have to come up now...

Unable to fall back asleep, I talked to Sylvie to pass the time. It started from small conversations about her time when she was training by herself to teaching her about the various objects and scenery we

passed in the remaining duration of the carriage ride. Throughout the months, Sylvie's mental growth had been rapidly increasing. Her knowledge and maturity had long passed a human of her age.

I wished at times that there would be more opportunities to train with my bond. Having seen Curtis and his World Lion in duels, I could tell that they spent numerous hours training together.

When we arrived at the destination, the moon was still high overhead, illuminating the warmly lit floating city of Xyrus. The guard stationed in front of the gate leading to Elenoir Kingdom hurried over to us with his left hand gripping the pommel of the sword strapped to his waist.

"State your reason for passage and proof of verification," the rugged guard demanded as his left hand eased off his sword, seeing that I was just a kid.

For some reason, his voice sounded vaguely familiar, and not just in a he-had-a-common-voice sort of way. Shrugging it off and pushing that nagging thought towards the back of my mind, I focused on the situation at hand.

Uncertain of what to say, I remembered that I still had the silver compass Virion gave me way back when I was a child. It had the insignia of the Eralith family so maybe it could be use as sufficient proof.

Wordlessly, I stuck my hand in my pocket and took out the compass from my ring outside of the guard's view and showed it to him.

"Hmm, I asked for the rea... th-this is the... right this way, sir. My apologies for being so disrespectful. I had no idea you had such close ties with the royal family." The crude expression was nowhere to be seen as he bowed down and hurriedly went back to the gate, activating it.

After the runes around the portal entrance glowed and started humming in a low pitch, he jogged back to us with an apologetic look on his face.

"Unfortunately, the gate can't immediately take you to the inside of the kingdom, but it will be in a relatively close vicinity to one of the entrances," the guard disclosed contritely, as if it was his fault.

"Mmm, that's fine. Thank you," I nodded.

Hmm... it seemed this was more than just a simple compass.

The humming coming from the portal intensified, while the ancient magic runes opened the portal. I turned my head back to see the guard giving me an exaggerated bow.

As my right foot stepped into the portal and I felt the familiar sensation of my body getting sucked in; the guard looked up.

The rugged-looking guard with scars etched on his face was gone, replacing it was the old man from the elixir store.

With a cheeky grin, he gave me a wink before saying, "Have a safe trip, young lad."

CYNTHIA GOODSKY'S POV:

When I reached a clearing in the woods, I heard the faint mumbling of chants with my enhanced hearing.

[Wind Cutter]

Dozens of nearly-transparent blades of compressed air whizzed towards me at a frightening speed.

Of course it was only natural that all of these spies would be wind mages.

I stood still, waiting for the wind blades to reach me before releasing a sound barrier.

Unscathed, I continued walking while I finished my second spell.

[Pulse Field]

The unlucky birds and rodent in the vicinity fell victim and dropped dead from the trees they were hiding in; along with them, a few unprepared spies also took the brunt and fell from their own hiding places, clutching their ears in agony. I had all of their locations.

Before I had the chance to send out another spell, I was forced to dodge a needle that managed to avoid my senses until the last second. Taking a quick look down, I could tell the projectile was coated with poison.

“Avier, take the ones to my right,” I stated monotonically.

‘Aye,’ my bond confirmed back through mental transmission.

Avier descended from the moonlit sky, and before long, I could hear the brief groans and howling of the spies that became prey.

A pity that their screams would never be heard.

On my side, I had to control myself to keep at least a few of them alive and able so I could get some information out of them.

In the end, only one managed to survive long enough to be questioned...

“GAAAAAAAAHHH!” the spy that was currently underneath me wailed.

It was fairly simple to torture him after destroying his mana core. Without magic protecting him, his body were simply too frail. I proceeded to crush his bones from the inside after giving him the chance to answer my questions. He remained unrelenting.

“Heh! You think I’ll tell anything to a traitor? You made a big mistake. They’re slowly regaining their... former strength. Just from the questions you asked, you assumed this continent had decades left, huh? Pfft! the people of this continent... will have less than ten years before the war begins.” He smirked, spitting the blood congealing inside his mouth at my face.

My cheeks couldn’t help but cramp at the confirmation of my fears. Pushing down my frustration, I placed my hand on the injured spy’s head.

His voice choking on the blood accumulating in his mouth, he croaked, “Long live the—”

His voice was cut short as liquid brain matter began leaking out from his ears and blood started dripping down his other orifices as the sound pulse I inflicted on the inside of his skull mashed his brain.

Dropping the lifeless body on the ground, I let out a sigh. Turning back, I made haste to my next destination, careful to avoid the corpses scattered on the ground.

“Do you mind cleaning up the mess, Avier?” I said apologetically.

“Human meat is too stringy for my taste, but I suppose it will have to do for now.” As my bond said this, his owl-like body began to glow before transforming into his wyvern form.

With only the moonlight illuminating the woods, the crunch of bones echoed loudly as Avier feasted on yet another batch of spies that had come from my homeland.

I let out a disappointed breath of air from the fruitless night as I wiped the blood off my face while changing my outer attire. My years on this continent had made me too soft. The apathy that I had once built towards death and torture was gone—replacing it with a sour taste in my mouth, just from killing a few brainwashed soldiers.

But even still... this was too easy...

Were they just a diversion?

Avier, who rarely let me ride on his back, carried me off to our next destination. I just hoped that my suspicions weren't correct.

The Beginning After The End – Chapter 82: At Last

ELIJAH KNIGHT'S POV:

By the time the DC officers and Student Council got out of the meeting with the professors, it was already late into the night.

I took that chance to tell them all what I couldn't earlier—that Arthur was alive and safe.

“Yes! I knew it! I knew he'd survive.” Claire had sunk down in her chair as she covered her face with her arms, probably to hide the stray tears that were sliding down her cheeks.

Curtis just let out a huge breath of relief as he leaned back against the wall; but it was Princess Kathyln's reaction that caught me off guard.

For once, I could visibly see her face brighten as she studied me to make sure I wasn't lying. I could almost see her chocolate-colored eyes twinkle as they turned up and a rare smikle formed.

“Thank God,” she muttered over and over under her breath after I reaffirmed the information with an awkward nod.

“As expected of my—sniff—rival. Mhmm.” The elf that kept insisting that he was Arthur's rival had a presuming look on his face as though he was the one that saved Arthur or something but the mucus leaking from his nose betrayed his expression.

“Heh, I knew the twerp wouldn't die from just a fall,” the bear leaning back on his chair scoffed. Theodore tried to play it off casually but the half-grin he tried to hold back told everyone that he was quite glad.

Kai, I think that was his name, responded very indifferently with a smile that looked superficially drawn.

“Looks like I’ll get my duel after all.” The buff midget, too ugly to be deemed anything but an “attractive” dwarf, nodded in anticipation, her arms crossed to show off her bulging veins.

Ugh, I’m recalling some unpleasant memories again.

Fairly obvious that they were all relieved, they didn’t mind that he wouldn’t be back to help out with the situation at hand for a bit longer.

Just the opposite—it felt like they wanted this whole fiasco taken care of before Arthur and Tessia got back.

This was odd because, more so than the professors here, I felt like Arthur would be able to do something about this mess if our Director didn’t get back in time.

I had told the Disciplinary Committee officers about Arthur after the Tri-Union Building site was under control. Luckily no one died and only a few students were mildly injured. An emitter brought over from the Adventurer’s Guild healed them and they were taken to the treatment ward where, before their parents came, they’d given their account for what happened inside.

The atmosphere within the academy had taken a turn for the worse as there was a clear split between the students now. The newly admitted elves and dwarves were furious, generalizing that all humans were racist brutes, while the prideful human students had no intention of taking the blame for the actions of others.

The few human students that did feel bad for what had happened ended up being ostracized by both sides. In the end, they just took a neutral stance, too afraid to say anything since at this point, the situation was too volatile; everyone was trying to find someone else to blame.

It was weird how people acted more recklessly when they banded together, like they got strength from each other. Both sides became more vocal after the building was put out and almost turned physical until the professors told them all to disperse.

Restless at this whole event, I ended up stopping by the training room that Arthur had allowed me access to. I normally didn’t use it, but since both Arthur and Tessia weren’t here, I decided it would be okay.

The guard eyed me funny but the front desk lady named Chloe was friendly enough to escort me personally into the room.

“Haaa...” I let out a deep breath as I felt my mana core tremble in excitement to let loose.

Unlike Arthur, I’d been learning a lot since I came to this academy; a lot of practical aspects applicable to my magic seemed to work differently for me compared to others.

One thing I noticed was that meditating didn’t do much for me. My mana core developed and strengthened at its own pace and any conscious effort to refine more mana from the atmosphere didn’t seem to help.

Even without any real effort, I broke through into the light orange stage but after reaching this stage, I just couldn't seem to make any gains.

I clenched my hands into fists and then released, repeating this motion as if my hands weren't my own.

[Earthen Spear]

I felt mana well up in me at the activation of the spell and immediately a rock spike shot up from the ground a couple meters in front of me.

[Earthen Spear]

I cast, this time with more mana imbued into the spell.

Two thick spears of earth shot up at an angle in front of me. To be honest, even casting with the name of the spell was unnecessary for me. It just became a habit for me so that I could keep a firm vision of what I wanted to evoke but if I practiced more, maybe I could even instantly cast multiple streams of spells at once.

[Stone Barrage]

This time, the ground underneath me crumbled as chunks of earth began levitating. After a couple moments of concentration, I willed the rocks to shoot forward.

Only four of the ten rocks I shot actually hit the tree that I deemed the target, making me a bit disappointed.

If I couldn't meditate to strengthen my mana core like everyone else, I might as well get better at controlling the spells at hand.

I learned in my Mana Utilization class what affinity towards a certain element exactly meant. For a mage with very little affinity to fire, it basically meant that mage had to be a lot more precise in conjuring the spell, which also meant that the vocal incantation of the spell needed to be longer. Each verse of an incantation that we chanted shaped the type of phenomenon we wanted to occur. For the rock bullet spell, a mage with little affinity would need to have a verse for each step he took: beginning from the shape of the rock, the density, where it would be made from; if you added in a spin to the bullet you would need to have a verse for that as well. Not forgetting the initial trajectory of the spell either, or if you wanted the rock bullet strengthened so that it would pierce the target, or explode upon impact—all of these would add up to a pretty long chant.

All these "factors" of the spell could easily just be imagined by a mage that had great affinity to the element. Mages stuck with the element that they had the highest affinity towards so that they could best utilize their mana and mental capacity.

For me, the earth below me felt like an extension of my body; maybe it was because I grew up with dwarves but I always had this nagging thought in the back of my mind that even amongst them I wasn't normal. I didn't mean not normal in a genius sort of way like Arthur was, but in a freak-of-nature sort of way.

Well, I guess Arthur was sort of a freak of nature in his own way...

It was an odd little train of thought. Those facts about my body or my disposition weren't top-secret stuff, but I didn't explicitly tell anyone either. I considered telling Arthur about the differences in my body, but I always missed the timing and it just didn't seem urgent enough to pull him aside and tell him.

It was good in a way because I felt like maybe, just maybe, I could some day catch up to Arthur if I trained hard enough.

Yeah, I know he was a solid yellow quadra-elemental mage with a dragon's will and he somehow had freakishly superb skills in close combat but hey, a guy could dream, right?

I conjured more spells, half to practice, half to relieve the pent up frustration. I wanted to catch up to Arthur, not because I wanted to be better than him, but because I wanted to help him. I felt like he always had his own battles he was facing. As his best friend, I wanted to have his back, whether through good times, or through war. I didn't know what sort of things he was going through but if I was going to be with him, I needed to get stronger.

ARTHUR LEYWIN'S POV:

I wanted to turn back, but it was too late; I was already inside the portal. The trip through the transportation never lasted longer than a few moments of unpleasant dizziness but this time, it felt longer... no. It WAS longer.

"Kuu..." Sylvie, who stuck to my head like glue began trembling.

'It feels wrong, Papa,' Sylvie transmitted, her inner thoughts traced with worry.

The journey through the transportation gate looked as though you were fast-forwarding to your destination. You're standing on a platform as a blur of different colors race by as the background gets lighter and lighter until you disappear into the light, exiting out the other end. It was a peculiar sensation that I couldn't seem to describe in words but this time, it was different.

The space around us distorted into a blur of colors like usual but instead of getting brighter, the color around of us drained and turned dimmer and dimmer, until it was pitch black.

'Papa, I'm scared.' Sylvie's trembling on my head was the only way I knew my bond was still there.

This was the first time Sylvie had told me she was scared. There were times when she was on guard, or alert, but she was never frightened.

The sensation of travelling through the gate that normally made me nauseous also ceased so I tautly augmented a ball of flame above my palm.

"What the hell..." It was bizarre. The ball of fire that was supposed to be giving me at least some sort of vision didn't do anything. Almost like trying to color in a red ball on a black piece of paper, it had no effect on the pitch black darkness.

An unsettling feeling loomed over me. I crumbled to my knees and instantly augmented my body with mana.

I was scared.

What sort of monster was here that had a thick enough malicious intent to make me fall to my knees?

I couldn't stop shivering and the mana in my body dispersed, refusing to listen to me from the lack of mental control I had over myself.

For the first time in a long while, I felt like a child—an actual, helpless child in front of the boogeyman.

“Who's there?” I tried my best to roar but my shaking voice betrayed me.

Just then, a pair of eyes came into view out of nowhere. I knew exactly whom this pair of eyes belonged to. I was sure of it; yet, it didn't comfort me or help me in knowing at all.

The pair of glowing white eyes speckled with stars, that captivated me the first time I saw them, grew close. An authoritative voice that was devoid of emotion pierced through me, as if he was speaking directly into my ear.

“At last. We now have a bit of privacy to peacefully converse.”

The Beginning After The End – Chapter 83: Benefactor

LUCAS WYKES' POV:

“And what the hell is this supposed to be?” I raised an eyebrow, looking around inside the dimly lit room that reminded me of some crudely built wine cellar.

It was that poor excuse of a mage from the Ravenpor House that brought me here, telling me that it would be something I'd be interested in.

I normally would've blasted that sod away when he talked to me so arrogantly, like he was doing me a favor; but I was quite curious, especially after the explosion at the Tri-Union Building earlier today.

“Welcome to one of the many humble dwellings that we use to hold our meetings,” said a coarse voice. I was surrounded by at least sixty hooded figures, but only the one sitting lazily in the middle while addressing me had a mask on.

It was a plain white mask with two small eyeholes and a smile crudely drawn where the mouth should be. The mask was rather simple enough but the simply drawn smile gave off a sinister feel.

Charles Ravenpor, who was next to me, put on his own hooded robe and knelt down on one knee with his head bowed.

“My lord, I have brought Lucas Wykes like you asked,” he said in a careful, hushed tone.

“Ahh, the famous Mr. Wykes, here in the flesh! So glad you could join us for our little...crusade!” he laughed, averting his attention from Charles.

I looked around. “I'm not here to join anything. I came here out of curiosity, but I'm not impressed. Who are you supposed to be, anyway? You don't seem to be a student... Don't tell me you're a professor?” I scoffed.

“How dare you! You should be grateful that we even considered letting a mutt like you join us!” one of the hooded figures to my right hissed.

"A mutt?" I echoed back, feeling a vein bulging from the side of my forehead.

I soundlessly prepared a spell for the ingrate who dared to mock me, but before I could finish the chant, the man behind the smiling mask snapped his fingers.

Suddenly, the hooded snob that call me a mutt let out a shrill howl as he combusted into flames.

I couldn't help but click my tongue. Even for instant casting, that was fast... frighteningly so.

"Now, now. That isn't a very courteous thing to say to our newest member, right?" As the masked man, who was still lazily sagged down on his earthen throne, spoke, the fire had already burned through the boy's robe, burning his skin.

"F-Forgive me! I was wrong. I apologize! P-Please!" he begged as he desperately tried to crawl toward the masked man. Meanwhile, the other hooded figures were too scared to do anything to help him.

Turning away from the hooded figure still screaming in pain, I faced the masked man. "Before I decide whether I want to even join this little cult of yours, what is it you're trying to accomplish, and why do you even need me?"

I couldn't sense his mana core but it didn't seem like I was on the same level as him.

"Circumstances make it unable for me to personally act for now, so I need some capable mages in order to thoroughly complete my plans. You see, I hate leaving loose ends," he explained as he used an arm to prop his head up.

"Taking advantage of your director's absence, it is the opportune time to act so that by the time she comes back, it will all be too late," he continued. After snapping his fingers again, the fire suddenly disappeared, leaving the boy twitching from the pain.

"And as for what I hope to do, let's just say that my goals coincide with these folks and I simply thought that it'd be nice to kill two birds with one stone. Everyone here is a dissatisfied human noble that once took pride in the fact that this academy was meant only for the purest of lineage. While you may be a special exception to this case, I would still like to have you on board," he answered plainly.

"Besides, the whole 'accept all' motto that this academy now follows makes me want to barf. Don't you agree, Mr. Wykes?" As he said this, the hooded figures all nodded fiercely in agreement. Just from his tone, I could tell that this guy was smirking behind his mask.

"Whether they make you want to barf or not doesn't matter to me. Why waste my time and energy on bugs I could squish at any time? The peasants that were able to weed their way into this academy aren't any better than the low-class adventurer thugs that go around blindly flailing their weapons. Even the nobles that were brought up in the most pampered conditions aren't worth c**p to me. If this is all that you have to say, then I have no reason to lower myself to be put on some leash and take commands from you," I snapped at him, turning my back.

"Lucas, what a hurtful thing to say. How could you ever compare yourself to some sort of dog tied to a leash?" He covered his mouth with his hands, sarcastically, like he was actually surprised.

“It seems like what I’ve heard is true. That you are a rather prideful mage that looks down on people of low birth. Did your friend, Arthur Leywin, not prove you wrong in this aspect?” The coarse voice playfully egged me on, making me stop in my tracks.

I whipped my head around. “What did you—”

“It doesn’t take a genius to figure out that, although you were hailed as a prodigy in the field of magic and have been pampered with elixirs and strengthening methods since your awakening, you aren’t a match for the child, Arthur Leywin,” he shrugged, holding his hand up.

I could feel my fists whiten in frustration, but he cut me off before I was able to refute.

“The sad thing is, he was never even trying. I bet even you always had a nagging suspicion that he had always been holding back, hahahaha!” He erupted into a fit of laughter as he clutched his stomach, legs kicking in the air.

“Who do you think you are?” I growled.

My body was already glowing as mana spilled out from my mana core, ready to fire at him, but I never did. This throbbing sense told me to not mess with him, like it was... hopeless.

No! I’m Lucas Wykes of the Wykes Family!

But who the hell was he and why did he talk like he was here the whole time, watching over us?

“I told you. I am but a mere benefactor that came here for the betterment of this land.” As he said this, he got up and gave an exaggerated bow with his arms spread out.

Sitting back down on his crude throne, he continued, “Mr. Wykes, I believe that, even if our views aren’t the same, we could have some sort of mutual benefit in this.”

“Go on,” I said through gritted teeth.

He ignored the fact that I was still completely surrounded by fire attribute mana, dangerously close to releasing it.

“Soon, I will be able to personally take part in this and when I do, I want to completely shatter the frail glue holding the three races together. However, until that time comes, I need your strength to help run things smoothly,” he explained.

“How do you personally plan on splitting up the three races and why would you think that doing this would even benefit me in any way? Besides, you think The Council and the Lances were made just for decoration?” I argued.

“The Council is tied up with various things at the moment, and I’ve taken extra precautions to make sure that your director is held up and out of reach. The field is set, Mr. Wykes, so let me ask you this—how would you like to have the ever so cautious Arthur Leywin fight you at his full strength, and for you to obtain the necessary power to defeat him even then?” He lifted his hand up, beckoning me toward him.

“How do you know about Arthur?” I pried, growing more cautious.

The man in the mask shrugged. "It's obvious that I'd do at least some research on my lovely recruits. So how about it... the power to defeat even your beloved Arthur?"

I remained silent, unable to make heads or tails out of this character.

"As long as you agree, I promise that you will get your hands on a level of power that you never thought was possible," he continued.

I looked at the hooded figures and could tell that they were interested as well, but stayed quiet due to the fear of becoming the next victim of the masked man's 'discipline.'

This was all too good to be true.

"If what you say is true and he has been cautiously hiding his powers to the extent that he has, how are you going to get him to fight me at his best?" I scoffed, unwilling to believe.

"Quite simple, actually, and it is also a task that I need to get done as well so it works out. Arthur is only human and he holds great importance to his family and his friends, but particularly more so to one person," he says as he lifted his index finger up, the smile on the mask most likely matching the sinister expression he had as well.

"Tessia Eralith..." I whispered, unable to hide the smirk on my face.

"Yes! Tessia Eralith! An elf! In this sacred Xyrus Academy, an elf is the leader of the students! Do all of you think this is right?" he bellowed at everyone so his voice echoed in the small dungeon.

"NO!" the hooded figures all roared in unison.

"She may not be here yet but I reckon she will soon, and most likely with Arthur. Don't you think that maybe a bit of elf princess blood being shed ought to get your buddy 'ol pal, Arthur, riled up?" he sneered as his hands ignited in flames.

I never cared for the elf princess besides thinking that she suited my tastes. I let her be since her body hadn't even matured yet but it did seem like something was going on between her and Arthur. Who did he think he was anyways, to think that he deserved someone like the princess of the elven kingdom?

He was just a lowly peasant.

As I began playing through the possible scenarios in my head, I couldn't help my lips from slowly curling upwards as I imagined his precious little lover's life in my grasp as Arthur begged me to stop. The brat who always thought he was better than I was...on his knees.

I wondered if he'd lose his sanity if I were to slowly bleed her in front of him?

I began licking my lips in anticipation. "Why the hell not!"

The Beginning After The End – Chapter 84: A Greater Scale

ARTHUR LEYWIN'S POV:

"At last, we finally have a bit of privacy to peacefully converse," a voice rang in my ear.

As soon as it spoke, the space around us began warping. Sylvie's trembling became so severe that I couldn't keep her perched on my head and had to hold her firmly in my arms.

Suddenly, in the midst of the chaos that was forming around us, we were in a blank white room.

I stared dumbly around my perimeter but couldn't find the words to express my confusion. Without being able to muster up even a voice to curse in surprise, I just idly waited.

In this white cube, it was only me, a quivering Sylvie, and the source of the all too familiar speckled pair of eyes.

By the time my eyes were able to adjust to the sudden brightness, I could make out the cat taking in a deep breath.

"Haa..."

Did it just sigh at me?

As I continued to kneel while clutching my bond, the cat I had seen at 'Windsom's Potions and Elixirs' started shaking its head at me after a little while.

It really was the same cat I saw back then...

The peculiarly eye-catching cat was sitting in a poised manner, its tail swaying hypnotically as its eyes locked onto mine. As the cat's gaze bored deeper into me, I began feeling like some sort of raw material being appraised by a veteran merchant who was deciding whether to buy me out or not.

I snapped out of my daze and began looking for the old man to pop out. As I was about to say something aloud, the cat started glowing in a golden white light that spread over its entire body.

Interrupted, I just kept my mouth shut and waited for the surprises to end. For some reason, I felt like no matter what I did at this point, I couldn't stop whatever was about to happen. It was an instinctual reaction that for some reason I just couldn't ignore.

While the aura and demeanor of this cat was heavy and oppressive, I knew that it didn't want to hurt me; otherwise, I would've been dead already.

The golden-white light began to change its shape and enlarge, changing from the form of a cat to that of a human.

As if it was made of glass, the sparkling human-shaped glow shattered into fragments of light, revealing someone I couldn't recognize.

"Greetings. I go by Windsom," the man sniffed deprecatingly.

The man that had transformed from a cat spoke with an elegance that matched his appearance. On the top of his sculpted face was a bed of short platinum blond hair that was neatly swept to the side. His deep-set eyes, that had not changed from when he was a cat, almost seemed to touch his permanently furrowed brows. There was a sense of nobility in his gaze as he continued to lock onto me.

While neither burly nor muscular, his square shoulders, underneath a military-like uniform he'd conjured after transforming, told me he was a warrior... a fighter like myself.

His thin lips tightened as he let out another sigh of disapproval through his sharp nose. Peering down at Sylvie and me, he spoke again.

"I felt this form would be more appropriate for our conversation," the man announced matter-of-factly.

I opened my mouth to say something but I held back. If he'd just disclosed he was Windsom, then what about the old man who stole my money? Was the man I originally thought was the owner of the elixir store just my own incorrect assumption? Then who was the old man? Windsom's attendant?

Composing myself, I let Sylvie down and stood up.

I dusted my clothes off and responded, "Before, we continue, I'd like to confirm a few things."

"..."

Windsom tilted his head to the side, thrown off by my sudden sharp and incisive tone.

"Since you lured me here for a reason and with Tessia as bait, is it safe to assume that she's alright?" I asked, taking the glittering marble ball out from my dimension ring.

After a slight pause, he replied, nodding, "Yes, your little elf princess is fine. I had already taken precautionary measures before you made your way here. She should be recuperating to a certain extent with her grandfather back at the elf kingdom.

That, on the other hand"—Windsom pointed at the marble in my hand—"is for you to keep."

It was my turn to be surprised.

"For me?" I asked.

"Yes. Do you know how hard it is to acquire an elixir pearl of that quality? Yet it went to waste on your little lover. In fact, it was too strong for her, which was why I had to waste another precious elixir to keep her body from...well, exploding." He let out another deep breath as he regarded me with the arrogance of a noble discussing politics with an ignorant bumpkin.

"Excuse me? Explode?" I sputtered, about to refute.

While taking a couple of steps toward me, he interrupted, "Well, I suppose without it, she would've been dead by now so it wasn't a complete waste. Still, don't give that one away and take the time to absorb the elixir pearl with your bond. It'll help with your training quite a bit."

Sylvie tilted her head in confusion while taking a look at the marble in my hand. Her shivering seemed to stop after Windsom controlled the pressure he was releasing.

I shook my head at this. "Shouldn't it be common courtesy to tell me exactly what is going on? Who or what exactly are you? Why did you bring me here?"

“Patience really isn’t a strong suit of yours, now is it? Very well, if I were to introduce myself in a way that would be easy for you to comprehend it’d sound a little something like this: I come from the land of asuras and am what you lesser races call a ‘deity.’” Windsom’s eyes remain unwavering as he said this.

“Deity? The deities that supposedly blessed the three races with artifacts that basically allowed them to eventually use magic?”

“Yes yes,” he nodded impatiently. “Keep in mind that what I’m about to tell you dates back centuries ago, with any form of records or accounts having been destroyed or possibly having never been written in the first place. It is in our best interest that we keep it this way.

“The extent of knowledge that you have lies in what the former elf king had told you. A deity blessing the three races with a set of artifacts that eventually allowed future generations to learn what you now call ‘magic.’ That was just the outcome of what had happened prior; something that no one on this land knows about,” Windsom continued narrating with his back ramrod straight, like he was lecturing a class.

I stayed silent, letting him continue.

“As you lot have recently discovered, there exists another continent in this world. The only two bodies of land that makes up the two ends of this world have always existed and have been protected and watched over by us. We asuras are and have been governed by a doctrine, a noblesse oblige of sorts if you put it simply, since the beginning of our existence. We are not to lay a hand on the lesser races inhabiting the land below, making sure only to act in times when either of the two continents fall out of balance or are on the brink of extinction.” He let out a sigh as he turned his back toward us. “That was, until we found out that this sacred rule had been broken.”

The look I had on my face must’ve given my thoughts away because Windsom replied, “I can imagine the multitude of questions you may have but the information that I’m sharing with you currently is only what you will need to know at this point. We have time, although not much of it, and telling you too much now will only distract you.”

Not much time?

It will only distract me?

Him telling me this only flooded my mind with even more questions, but I just took a deep breath and signaled for him to carry on as Sylvie kept looking back and forth between the two of us in confusion.

He gave a nod back and continued.

“Despite how you may refer to us as deities, we are far from gods... or rather, we’re far closer to you than you think. Much of the economy in Dicathen and Alacrya was originally mimicked after the systems of my land Epheetus, the land of asuras.”

Epheetus and Alacrya...

“Of course, while Epheetus isn’t nearly as large as either of the surface continents, much of how the gears of society work is comparable. Epheetus was once divided into three factions that were made up of multiple clans in each of them. Boiling it down quite a bit, the ruling clan of each faction had their own nuance in ideals, which congregated the other clans to join either of the three factions. While ideals

may have been different, every clan of asuras still kept to the paramount creed that we were not to lay a hand against the lesser races. However, after Agrona, the successor of the Vritra Clan, came into power, things quickly changed.”

The name Vritra rang in my mind like thunder. Vritra wasn't the name of the black-horned demon but the name of its clan?

“What was this Agrona like and what happened to the Vritra Clan?” I leaned forward in anticipation.

I could tell Windsom had to pause for a bit to gather his thoughts. “The Vritra Clan had always been an anomaly. It's simplest to imagine them as scientists of sorts. While their innate magic is unique and versatile, it was never as powerful as the other clans' mana arts. However, coupled with their genius minds and insatiable curiosity, they were always one of the central clans.”

“If they'd always been one of the stronger clans, how come things became so different once the Vritra Clan came into power?” I queried.

“A clan being strong and a clan becoming a leader of a faction are two different things. Again, think of the Vritra Clan as scientists, as researchers. The clan had very little interest in anything other than gaining knowledge and insight on utilizing mana. Like ivory tower residents, they were secluded knowledge seekers that only pursued what they could not yet comprehend; the previous head of the clan was even more so fervent in his quest to overcome the impossible. However, Agrona... he was different. While charismatic and intelligent, he was arrogant and power-hungry. He believed that the asuras were never meant to watch over the lesser races but rather rule over them as their gods,” he clarified.

Windsom's face tensed as continued speaking. “After Agrona began leading the Vritra Clan, however, their strength abruptly increased unnaturally. No one could figure out how Agrona could advance the Vritra Clan's mana power in such a short time. Eventually, through their rise in power, they were able to rally up more clans to share his ideals and the Vritra Clan soon led a faction on par with either of the other two existing factions.

“It was only later that we found out that Agrona and a few other of the Vritra Clan had secretly been making trips to the Continent of Alacrya. While it wasn't forbidden for us to go down to Dicathen or Alacrya as long as we concealed ourselves, their movements and behaviors were eerily suspicious. After the other two factions found out about this, they sent out scouts to figure out what they were up to.” I could see Windsom's knuckles whiten by how hard he was clenching his fists.

“Agrona and the Vritra Clan had been inhumanely torturing the lesser races by experimenting on their bodies to find different ways to enhance their own abilities...”

Scenes from my past flashed in my mind at this. The different dungeons becoming corrupted, traces of the black-horned demons that kept appearing all clicked together at Windsom's last statement.

“Being brutally honest, this information was enlightening and all, but what does this have to do with me? Why tell me all of this? I can't imagine what could make a deity or asura or whatever single me out to reveal something as important as this.”

“You’re right. Besides your own abilities, which are barely noteworthy by our standards, there really shouldn’t be a reason to tell you all of this. The only reason I do so is because of your ties to us,” he answered, pointing down.

“Kyu?”

I subconsciously stepped in front of Sylvie to protect her.

“We’ve been searching for Lady Sylvia for years with no success, yet after finally finding traces of her mana, it led me to a little boy with her exact mana signature; what’s even more shocking is that, after watching over him, he held in his hands a deity. Arthur, you are currently bonded with the child of my master’s only daughter, and the granddaughter of the highest level of power in the leading faction of Epheotus.”

The Beginning After The End – Chapter 85: Lineage

The fact that all of this was somehow connected to Sylvia didn’t surprise me. If anything, it just confirmed everything that I had presumed until now.

But...

Lady Sylvia...

The daughter of the highest position of power in a land of deities...

Even with my status as a king in my previous life, a figure of such stature would be someone I could only kneel down in submission to.

A dry lump caught in my throat as I stared down at my bond. Of course, the possibility of Sylvie being the actual child of Sylvia was always there, but due to the circumstances of her being chased by the black-horned demons... the Vritra Clan, I could never confirm. The fact that Sylvie’s appearance looked vastly different from her mother also didn’t help.

Grandpa Virion’s voice suddenly popped into my mind. He was the one that confirmed that Sylvie was a dragon. From what he told me and what I’d read, while dragons were extraordinarily rare and powerful, nothing mentioned them being higher beings, let alone Asuras.

“So are the dragons written down in past texts actually deities?” I inquired.

Windsom faced me, letting out an impatient sigh. “No. While there are lesser races that have descended from us deities, it is rather offensive to compare us. I will put aside the biology lesson for another time, but there are general facts you do need to know. While there are special exceptions due to innate differences in each clan, in most cases, deities have three main forms. The humanoid form that I am in currently, a draconic form which is most likely the form that Lady Sylvia had used to pass down her will to you, and a third form which integrates both humanoid and draconic aspects.”

“Then you’re saying that Sylvie has a human form?” I couldn’t help but point a finger at my bond in exasperation.

“Yes, but Lady Sylvia must have cast a seal on her own daughter, because the mana signature that she is producing is not nearly the same as it should be. Arthur, how did you come to meet her?”

“Before Sylvia was killed or taken away by the black-horned demons, she gave me a stone that turned out to be what I figured was an egg,” I clicked my tongue. Explaining this made me recall some unpleasant memories.

“Black-horned demons?” Windsom tilted his head.

“It’s how I describe them because of their appearance. From what you told me just now, though, they seem to be what you call the Vritra Clan.”

“Indeed, the Vritra Clan is known for their prominent onyx horns... While this was one of the most probable outcomes, it also means that there is very little hope that she is alive. Arthur, Lady Sylvia undoubtedly put a seal on her child in hopes that the Vritra Clan would not be able to find her.” For once, there was a twinge of emotion on Windsom’s face that wasn’t annoyance. I could see the sadness glazed over his eyes as he took a moment to gather himself.

“So does that mean deities are usually born in a humanoid form?” I couldn’t help but ask.

“Yes. Our draconic form uses up a lot of our mana so we spend most of our time in our humanoid form. However, just like how I can shift into the form of a smaller animal, Lady Sylvia’s daughter seems to be in that form to conserve energy.”

“You keep referring to her as Lady Sylvia’s daughter, but she has a name. It’s Sylvie. I named her after Sylvia,” I pointed out. “Also, is it possible for Sylvie to turn into her humanoid form now?”

At this, Windsom merely shook his head before responding. “Most likely not. The humanoid form is the most natural for us, so if Lady Sylvia’s—Lady Sylvie, was able to transform into this form, she would’ve done so already.”

There was a torrent of questions flooding my mind now that I knew for a fact that Sylvie was an Asura. Imagining her in a human form was hard enough, but what did it mean for us since we were bonded? Did Asuras bond to each other in Epheotus? Although Sylvie was the one that initiated the bond, it wasn’t something that I could imagine doing with someone that looked like a human.

I knew Windsom would say something along the lines of, ‘I’ll only tell you what is necessary for you to know right now,’ so I pushed those thoughts aside and pressed on what we talked about earlier.

“So since Sylvia, the daughter of a very important figure to you deities, did give her will to me, that makes me automatically involved in this upcoming fight that you guys are most likely going to have with the Vritra Clan and co., right? Also, the fact that Sylvie, the granddaughter of the so-called very important figure, is bonded to me begs another question... Are you planning on taking her back to Epheotus?” My eyes narrowed as I tried to read Windsom’s expression.

“Yes. Dumbing it down quite a bit, that is the essence of what I explained to you. You may or may not have figured out just how mysterious and powerful Lady Sylvia’s powers are. Even if you were able to unlock some of the mana arts only she could use, I doubt you were able to tap into a fraction of her true abilities. Arthur, even Asuras would drool in greed at the thought of receiving Lady Sylvia’s powers. While even she wasn’t able to fully control them, her powers had...have the potential to outstrip her father’s.” There was a look of longing and respect in this Asura’s eyes as he explained all of this.

“As for taking Lady Sylvie back to Epheetus, while that was indeed our immediate preference, we have decided on a different route. Arthur, we will be entering into war with the Fallen Clans, the forces led by Agrona and his Vritra Clan, soon. After the last war, both sides sustained immense casualties and had no choice but to settle for a truce. Agrona agreed not to touch Dicathen, but in return, we had to give up the Continent of Alacrya to him.

“While our forces may have stronger powerhouses, they possess too many unpredictable factors with the experiments they had time to explore during this period. The truce is losing its power as the Fallen Clans continue to grow their troops. We have already found traces of Agrona’s troops in this continent. While the upper echelons of Epheetus would never verbally admit it, we need help, and your future potential can play a crucial role in this. As long as you, Arthur Leywin, agree to be our ally, there will be no need to separate you from Lady Sylvie.”

Even though Windsom was asking me for a favor, the way he looked at me dead in the eye made me feel like he was presenting me a role of the highest honor.

He had me. There really wasn’t much of an option for me to choose. If I declined him, he would forcefully take Sylvie away and Dicathen would still most likely end up becoming war torn. With that, my family and friends would be in danger whether or not I became their ally.

He was basically implying that I was going to be involved in this war one way or another. The choice was up to me on how directly I wanted to fight against our mutual enemies.

Letting out a scoff, I agreed. “Since this war involves the entirety of this continent anyways, I would be an ally to you whether I agreed or not today. Rather, what you are asking for is if I can be a p**n under your control.”

“I can’t disagree with your statement. You’re wise for your age, Arthur,” Windsom smirked. “I take it by your answer that you agree to our proposal. This war will change the entire balance of this world. If Agrona and his forces are able to take over this continent as well as all of its resources, there will come a time when even Epheetus will be in danger. That being said, we will need to prepare you. Your mana core is rather well-developed for your age, which is a good sign. But training you will have to come after you’re able to at least reach the white stage. With the resources we will provide you and your comprehension skills, I can’t imagine it to take too long. After that, we will need to take both you and Lady Sylvie to Epheetus to train under the most optimal cond—”

“Hold on, I’m going to Epheetus? Your home? The land of Asuras?” I nearly shouted, flabbergasted.

“Of course. Do you think that my master will stand idly now, knowing that he has a granddaughter? Arthur, you are the last one to have seen Lady Sylvia. On top of that, she has passed on to you, her mana signature. You may not realize what that means but to us Asuras, it would be metaphorically pulling out your own mana core and giving it away. If she was forced into a state where she had no choice but to do this, we have no choice but to assume she has passed away.”

I didn’t answer.

“There isn’t much I can help you with directly for now except provide for you some resources to strengthen your mana core. During this time, I also have things to investigate and prepare for. I will

continue to drop by from time to time and check up on you, whether I let you know I'm there or not will be at my discretion."

"Okay, since it seems like this whole meeting is coming to a close, can I just ask you one thing?" I held my hand out to stop him.

"Go ahead."

"How come it took so long for you to find me? If her mana signature basically transferred onto mine, wouldn't either you or the Vritra Clan have pinpointed me pretty easily?"

"Because of that," Windsom pointed at my arm. "When she first passed on her will, or mana signature, to you, it didn't show right away. You probably went through a phase where you had to get your body accustomed to it, right?"

I just nodded at this.

"Well after it did, I'm not sure how shortly after her daughter was released from her seal but when you put one of Lady Sylvia's feathers around your bond insignia, it hid the presence of her will. I'm sure you only put that on your arm to hide the insignia mark or maybe because you thought it made you look cool—"

"It was to hide the insignia mark," I immediately replied.

"Nevertheless, you did well in doing this." Windsom shook his head. "Let me take you to where you were actually headed to now. I'm sure the elf princess misses her prince dearly."

Even though his face stayed straight, I could feel the sarcasm in his voice. Sylvie and I wordlessly followed the Asura as the room we were in began distorting once more.

WINDSOM'S POV:

As I watched the child and his bond go through the gate, I couldn't help but let out a strained breath.

Every time I saw her, a mixture of emotions would boil up inside of me, making it difficult for me to stay calm. I wondered how Master would feel when he sees her. I could imagine how conflicted he might feel seeing the child of his precious daughter and the man that did that to her...

There would come a time when we would have no choice but to tell Arthur everything about his bond. About Lady Sylvia's daughter and the lineage she holds...

The Beginning After The End – Chapter 86: Elven Kingdom

ARTHUR LEYWIN'S POV:

"Ugh..."

I stumbled coming out of the teleportation gate as I pressed my fingers firmly against my temples to keep my head from popping.

Sylvie scampered next to me, happy to be out in the open again.

"Kyu~" She let out a big stretch on the grass before looking up at me, signalling that she was ready.

'That man was scary, Papa,' Sylvie's voice rang in my mind.

"Yeah, he didn't really come off as easygoing to me either," I responded.

The place we landed was a familiar one. It was near the area where Tess first led us in order to get inside the Kingdom of Elenoir. Of course, this time, we were going to have to knock on the front gates like most people. It wasn't too much of a problem to get inside the kingdom now that the three races were more or less in harmony.

Every time I thought of the word 'race' I could hear Windsom saying in his annoyingly serious voice how we were the lesser races.

As much as it irked me, he wasn't wrong. Compared to the Asuras, even I could see the innate differences between him and me, and from what he led on, it didn't seem like he was the strongest of Asuras either.

"Well, I guess you know who your mother is now, at least."

"Kyu?" 'Mama? Aren't we going to see Mama right now?'

"No, not that Mama. I mean, Tess isn't your mother! Sheesh!" I exclaimed.

Sylvie only tilted his head as she looked at me in confusion before scampering around again, leaving me flustered at my bond.

As we made our way to the front gate, following alongside the outer walls of the kingdom, we passed the occasional carriages and wagons followed by people either transporting the goods inside or guarding it.

The economy was rapidly changing since the union of the three races. Opening up borders so that merchants can travel and trade with each other had led to a lot of unique goods becoming available in all three kingdoms. Once we reached the entrance into the kingdom, there was a line of people either riding horses and mana beasts or in carriages, waiting to go inside.

Sylvie hopped on my head as I got to the end of the line beside a group of what looked like mercenaries most likely trying to sell the raw material they managed to obtain.

"Ey! Looky at the lil' brat! Why you so far from your mama, lil' boy? You lost?" a rather tall and thin, almost emaciated, man in leather armor too large for him, hooted as he bent down.

"Roger, you're going to make the boy cry with that ugly face of yours." A girl that looked to be in her early twenties jumped off the end of the carriage she was sitting on and pulled Roger back.

"There is nothin' wrong with my face!" Roger lashed out at his female cohort. "Besides, this brat looks to be some sort of rich noble brat! I betcha if we bring him back to his parents, they'll reward us big time!"

"You haven't said anything. Are you lost, boy?" asked another man, one that looked to be in his early thirties with a body built like it was meant to wrestle elephants, pushed aside the drooling Roger that was staring at me like I was a money bag.

"No, sir, I'm not lost. I have some business here," I replied.

“Business here, my a*s! Don’t go trying to sounding all snooty-tooty. I bet you just ran away from your momma. Duke, let’s just grab this twerp and take him to the Guild Hall,” Roger smirked as he slowly made his way towards me.

I let out a sigh as I contemplated whether it was worth the effort to shove this bag of bones into the ground.

“Grrr...” Sylvie, who was perched on top of my head again, stood up, baring her teeth at the malnourished mercenary.

These fools were actually thinking of basically kidnapping a child here in the open...

While my stance remained the same, I imbued a thin layer of mana around my body just in case.

“Roger, Duke. Leave the boy alone,” a hoarse voice came from inside the carriage.

“Erk. It’s the boss.” Roger froze in his tracks with a reluctant expression.

“Tch. Let’s head back to the carriage, Roger,” Duke clicked his tongue and gave me one last curious glance before turning his broad back to me.

I just rolled my eyes and stayed put in the line for travelers without carriages that need to be inspected first.

—

“Sorry, Boss. I know you how you like to keep face, but this time, it would’ve been a totally legit excuse! I mean, all we would do is keep the brat from talking and eventually, we’d just put him in the Guild Hall and sack in a nice reward.”

“Sir, while Roger isn’t the brightest guy most of the time, I think he was right in that boy was actually from a wealthy family judging by his uniform and the peculiar bond on his head. If you didn’t stop us, I think we could’ve—”

“Fools! You think I was protecting the boy? I was protecting you two dolts from him!”

“...”

“Both of you guys are mages, yet you still couldn’t see the clear differences in power? Even I wasn’t able to sense the level of his mana core!”

“But Boss, even if the boy was a mage, he couldn’t have awakened more than a couple of years —”

“Shut up. Just know that if you guys had stepped out of line just then, even I wouldn’t have been able to save you.”

—

After the first moment of reluctance in letting a possible runaway child into their kingdom, the guards erased their doubts when I showed them the Xyrus Academy crest since showing the royal family’s crest might attract a bit too much attention for my tastes. Before entering, however, the elven guards did give me a stern warning that the use of magic was prohibited in all but the most extreme cases.

I didn't have the time to explore around much while I was being trained by Gramps so seeing all of this was new to me.

The city that we had entered was bustling with an almost chaotic mixture of people from all around the continent, laughing and haggling around different stands and small shops. The Elven Kingdom of Elenoir was different from the Human Kingdom of Sapin; since the entire kingdom was walled off, the cities were more like giant districts rather than separated settlements.

Since the royal family's tree castle was located in the far end city of the kingdom, it took me a couple of hours of traveling via a small transport carriage.

The driver dropped us off at the border just before the castle since not just anyone would be allowed directly inside. A major difference from the last time I came here was that there were now guards around the perimeter of the castle as well. While I'm sure they always had guards and security, they weren't so blatantly placed to ward off intruders like they were now. Again, most likely an outcome of the kingdom opening its doors to the other races.

"Stop. Little boy, I think you're a bit lost," a burly elf held his hand out and warned. He looked at me curiously before stopping his gaze at Sylvie who was now next to my foot.

"No, I know exactly where I am. If you'd be so kind as to let me through, it'd be much appreciated," I replied without taking a second glance at the guard while pulling out the compass with the royal family's crest Grandpa Virion gave me back then.

"How do you have this?" The burly guard squinted his eyes in suspicion as the other guards gathered around me.

"I thought that having this compass meant that a member of the royal family entrusted it to me." I couldn't help but let out a sigh.

When was the last time I was ever given a smooth passage these days? Starting from the teleportation portal to the mercenaries and now here.

"This brat. Is he being sarcastic with us?" another guard growled.

"Sigh... just please inform either Princess Tessia or Elder Virion that a boy named Arthur Leywin is here to see them. They'll know who I am." I took a few steps back and leaned back against one of the stone statues in front of the manor.

All of a sudden, a loud BOOM! pierced the air as part of the castle exploded and chunks of the building fell down on top of us.

"What the hell is—"

As the other guards jumped out of the way to avoid the debris, the one that questioned me didn't have enough time to react after turning around.

I heard him click his tongue as he focused mana into his body, positioning himself between me and a falling piece of the castle wall.

While his attitude was crude, I guess he wasn't a bad person.

With currents of mana already flowing inside of me, I conjured a gale to circle around us, instantly encasing us in a dome of wind.

[Wind Barrier]

The debris most likely wouldn't have killed any of the trained guards but even with mana augmentation around their bodies, it wouldn't have been a pretty sight.

I kept my spell active, noticing the gaping face of Guard Number One switching his gaze back and forth between me and the wind barrier.

All of a sudden, a familiar figure jumped backwards down from the ledge of the explosion site, landing just next to us.

"You guys alright down... Ah! Arthur, good to see you again, brat! Sorry for this, but you're going to need to give me a hand." As Grandpa Virion returned his focus to the site of the explosion, I dispersed my spell.

"Gramps, what's going on? Was there an intruder?"

"Bah! You think I'd be having this much trouble if it was just an intruder?" Virion clicked his tongue in frustration.

"Then who—"

Another explosion sounded from the site.

"Grandpa! Stop this thing!! I can't control i~~~~t!"

Out from the giant hole in the mansion appeared Tess, surrounded by dozens of emerald green tendrils made of mana swaying sporadically, destroying everything it hit.

Of course.

I couldn't help but curse under my breath. I initially blamed Windsom since he was supposed to have cured her of the beast will that was trying to take over her body; paying attention, however, since Tess was still conscious and quite rowdy, I deduced that she most likely couldn't control the mana she released even while awake and aware.

"Tch. That aura is pretty frightening. Those tentacle-like vines protect Tess as well as attacks anything within its range. Even if I try cutting it, more tendrils take its place. Brat, I'll support you from the back. Try to reach Tess; my techniques aren't really useful for anything other than assassinating and right now, we need a way to overpower this aura."

I gave Virion an affirming nod and took a step forward, concentrating more mana around me.

"Elder Virion. We can assist as well! Please instruct us on—"

"No! You guys would be useless against her. Just clear the area and make sure no one comes near here." Grandpa Virion waved his hand without turning back.

I took a peek at the baffled guards. When I checked their mana core levels earlier, they seemed to be around the solid to light orange stage, which would be considered top tier considering their ages.

“But Elder, the child is—”

“Go. Now! I don’t have time for this,” Grampa Virion growled.

These elites that were probably never called useless in their lives muttered in confusion, looking at me with peculiar eyes before clearing the way.

“You know, Gramps, they probably still could’ve helped.”

“The less people that know about my granddaughter’s powers, the better. At least at this point. Now focus, brat,” he breathed, keeping his gaze on Tess.

“Aye aye, sir,” I smirked.

“Let’s go!”

At Grandpa Virion’s signal, we made a break for Tessia, who was on the edge of the mansion.

Augmenting my legs in wind attribute mana, I waited until a condensed gale formed underneath my feet before launching off from the ground.

Even though Tess’ back was facing us, the tendrils responded as soon as we got close. Immediately, the vines that were erratically swaying straightened up and shot themselves at us.

“Keep going! I’ll cover you!” Grandpa Virion shouted from the back.

While I had my back turned to him, just by the change in his voice, it was obvious that Grandpa Virion had initiated the first phase of his beast will.

The two of us hacked our way closer and closer towards Tess, who was struggling to gain control over the emerald green aura surrounding her.

I stuck with using wind spells, afraid that the aura would conduct any lightning attribute spells. Since we were in a mostly wood environment, I also held back on any fire spells.

As soon as our wind blades severed the tendrils, they dissipated, another batch of tendrils taking their place.

It wasn’t working.

I took a deep breath, relying on Grandpa Virion to cover me for a couple of seconds.

After finishing my chant, I felt a sizeable drain on my mana, along with a slight tingling sensation coursing throughout my body.

[Thunderclap Impulse]

The tendrils that were evidently growing in number appeared to be overwhelming us in slow motion. Having the luxury to take a glance back, even Grandpa Virion’s attacks slowed down enough where I could see his movements.

Dodging the tendrils, I avoided wasting mana on other spells until I reached Tessia.

Every step forward at this point involved me dodging at least five tendrils, until I finally reached arm's length of the troublesome princess.

Grabbing her by the waist, I prepare my final spell.

"Eek! A-A-Arthur?" Tess squealed in surprise.

Before I had the chance to respond, the tentacles suddenly retracted and gathered around the two of us before springing us off the mansion through the hole made by the explosion. With my technique still active, I was able to react in time to hold onto her before the two of us skyrocketed up into the air.

"KYYYYAAAAHHH!" Tessia's voice echoed loud enough for the whole kingdom to probably hear.

"Hold on tight!"

Locking my arms around her, I surrounded her in a layer of protective mana before casting my spell.

[Absolute Zero]

The amount of time it took to cast my spell took a lot longer without using the second phase of my dragon will.

As the layer of frost slowly spread out from around us, freezing the tendrils trying desperately to separate me from Tess, I had to keep my concentration to the max to keep the spell going.

"Break!" I roared before taking a kick at the completely frozen tendrils, shattering it into countless shards of shimmering little diamonds.

It was a gamble to try and freeze the tendrils that Tess manifested and, like expected, my spell wasn't strong enough to completely freeze everything, but I was able to separate the tendrils from their source of fuel, Tess.

Tess had a glazed look in her eyes as she hung onto my neck, mesmerized by the thousands of falling ice shards reflecting the amber lights of the city.

Our eyes locked and Tess immediately blushed.

I gave her a playful wink in response.

"Hi there."

The Beginning After The End – Chapter 87: Winding Down

TESSIA ERALITH'S POV:

Tell me I'm dreaming...

The last thing I remembered was trying to release the first phase of my beast will. Grandpa had been really surprised after he checked my mana core, saying that my body was somehow already fully integrated with the elderwood guardian's beast will.

I didn't fully understand why Grampa had been so surprised, but I remembered Arthur taking a few years to fully integrate with his.

Does this mean I'm catching up to him?

No, we were just kids at that time, but he was able to smoothly integrate. Grandpa told me how amazing that was.

It wasn't fair.

Every time Grandpa talked about Arthur, all he had were words of praise. If it had been any other person, I would be jealous.

But it's okay; he's mine anyway...

Well, not yet...

But soon, he will be!

...Hopefully.

Stupid Arthur! I wanted to impress him by being able to control the beast will he gave me.

So much for that... I completely failed and even destroyed part of the castle!

Oh my gosh... Mother and Father aren't going to be too happy when they see this...

And then he showed up...

Arthur just had to make his appearance at the worst possible time.

Now he's holding me like some I'm some sort of damsel in distress! Though, begrudgingly, I couldn't deny that I was in a sorry state...

I can't look him in the face. I know if I look at him, I'll start blushing.

Don't look, Tess! Don't look! Don't—

Dang it, I looked!

"Hi there." Arthur gave me a charming wink with his blue eyes.

I could feel my own face burning like an oil-dipped candle but I couldn't seem to peel my eyes away from his gaze until we landed.

"Sh-shouldn't you put me down now?" I managed to stammer out, giving it my all to keep my voice from cracking.

There was a twinkle in his eyes as he playfully smiled at me while he put me down. I knew he was enjoying my embarrassment.

Ugh...

"Are you okay, Tess?" Grandpa caught up to Arthur and me. He was sweating and had minor injuries from where my beast will's aura hit him but otherwise, thankfully, he looked fine.

“Yes, Grandpa. Sorry for causing this mess.” My gaze lowered to see that Arthur’s right leg was bleeding through his pants.

Oh no! He’s hurt! I really messed up this time...

Before I even had the chance to apologize, a stinging pain suddenly radiated above my brows.

“Oww! Wha—” I stared wide-eyed at Arthur who had suddenly flicked my forehead.

“I’m just glad our troublesome princess isn’t hurt. Right, Gramps?” Arthur said in comfort.

Even though he teased me like this, his worried gaze couldn’t help but make me feel warm inside.

“Yes, my troublesome little granddaughter is fine. That’s all that matters. Who cares if she destroyed half of a historic mansion passed down in our family,” Grandpa smirked.

I felt like I had shrunk half my size in embarrassment as both my grandfather and Arthur broke out into laughter.

ARTHUR LEYWIN’S POV:

It took a while for Tess to be able to look me in the eyes after I had let her back down. As soon as Gramps called the guards back, we left the manor for them to keep watch. While the royal family’s mansion was still standing strong besides the gaping hole in the corner, due to security reasons, Virion arranged for us to be taken to an inn, where it was easier for the guards to keep an eye out for any potential harm.

“I should let my son know about what happened in case he and his wife come back early from the meeting. They’ll probably assume the worst case scenario.” Gramps let out a deep sigh.

He rubbed his temples as we sat down on a leather couch at a separate lounge in the first floor of the Spiral Ivy Inn.

I won’t lie. It was a pretty enjoyable sight once we got inside. Since it was just around dinner time, the inn was filled with indistinguishable babble and clatters of plates and utensils. Once they saw us, it felt like someone muted the entire inn. Before us were the baffled faces of the inn workers and customers that dropped everything, including their jaws, as they witnessed the former king of the kingdom, disheveled in appearance, carrying his granddaughter, the princess, accompanied by an unknown human child.

Fortunately, the inn manager quickly raced out, beating back all of the nearby elves and merchants courageous enough to horde us, and escorted us to the VIP lounge.

“I must apologize for this, Elder Virion. We weren’t expecting a visit from someone of your status or else we would’ve surely made accommodations.” The manager’s posture was deliberately lowered, one hand cupping the other. “Might I ask what brought you to our humble inn?” he continued on.

“The manor is a bit... messy at the moment. We’re fine here for now; just have a room for us to stay.” Gramps waved the manager away after setting down Tess, who had fallen asleep on the way here. You could almost see a tail fiercely wagging from the ever-attentive manager upon receiving Virion’s directions, and he nodded like a puppy that had just gotten a treat from his master.

I got myself settled on the couch facing Virion's and laid down the sleeping Sylvie who had been quietly snoring in my arms long before we got here. "So what happened back there, Gramps?"

"You wouldn't believe this, brat. I examined her mana core the other day and guess what... her body was already fully integrated with the Elderwood Guardian's beast will!" Virion leaned forward. The excitement in his sharp eyes contrasted how softly he spoke to not wake Tess up.

"You can't be serious... How can her body be fully integrated with an S class beast—" I stopped mid-sentence, remembering what Windsom had said. Were the orbs that he gave to Tess responsible for this unprecedented phenomenon?

"What's wrong? Why did you stop talking all of a sudden?" Virion raised a brow.

"No, it's nothing. I was just thinking. Gramps, is that why Tess tried to release the first phase of her beast will?"

Virion let out a wry laugh at this while he scratched his cleanly-shaven chin. "We both got a little ahead of ourselves in thinking that Tess would be able to control her powers because her body was already integrated."

While the integration between the beast will and the host was essential in order for the body to fully adapt to a mana beast's will, especially for one that was at a higher stage than their own strength, it was also a training process of sorts. Through the integration process, you became accustomed to how the beast will might affect your body and how you could control its powers, even if it was just a little bit.

Tessia was able to skip this long and arduous process, whether fortunately or not, preventing her from becoming exposed to what effect the beast will could have on her when released.

"It's fine now that everything has been settled, but Tess needs to be more careful when using her beast will. It could be dangerous for her and everyone around her if things escalated like they had today." I sank back into my seat, taking a long look at the sleeping princess.

"Mmm. I was thinking the same thing. Maybe getting a seal to suppress her mana until she's able to better control her beast will would be best. It's a shame that there's no specific seal for beast wills; I worry that she won't be able to protect herself while her seal is on. Even if it was removable, she would be practically defenseless without mana protecting her for a period of time," Virion let out a deep sigh.

"You could always give her some sort of protective artifact. If that's not enough to keep peace in your mind, I'll be there too, Gramps. I won't let anything happen to your precious granddaughter."

"Oh, I'm sure you'd protect Tessia even if she wasn't my granddaughter," Virion shot me a teasing wink.

We discussed a bit more about the potential powers that Tessia's beast will might have until the both of us were too tired to continue on. Tessia stirred awake every now and then while Sylvie was so deeply asleep that the only indication that my bond was still alive was the rhythmic expanding and contracting of her belly.

We found ourselves in a luxurious suite with more than enough bedrooms for each of us upon reaching the uppermost level of the inn. The rooms were lavishly decorated in ornaments and trinkets with the walls intricately laid out with vines, giving the place a very fairy-like ambience.

Virion set Tess down inside one of the rooms and came back out to the living room as he poured himself a concoction from a bottle that I assumed to be some sort of liquor.

After wishing him a good night, I tossed Sylvie onto the bed as she kept sleeping, unfazed, while I changed into the loose silk robe that was hung up on a h**k. Taking a deep breath, my mind ran through the events of today. After the intense happenings as of late, I finally had some time to consolidate my thoughts. With some time to think, I divulged myself in what I seemed to forget to do since being born again into this world. I began to strategize.

When I wasn't training my own strength, I was constantly coming up with different methods of handling my problems. It was essential to come up with a backup plan in case things went wrong, and a backup for the backup plan for when Plan B went horribly out of line. I hated to admit it, but there were times when I caught myself regressing in the way I handled things. As the world around me became some sort of exaggerated fairytale, my mindset also turned into that of an immature and shallow child-like protagonist.

Streams of if-then scenarios played out in my mind as I thought back to what I discussed with Windsom. If things were really happening as the Asuras made it out to be, then I needed to prepare in advance. Advancing my mana core would be the easy part. I was more worried about what I'd have to leave behind, at least temporarily, while I started training.

Before I left, I'd have to make sure that my family, Elijah, Tess, Grandpa... that they'd all be protected enough so that when the war started, they could be relatively safe if I was not there.

I thought about my sister, Eleanor. She was still making progress on awakening but it'd still be maybe a year or two before she'd be able to start learning magic. She and Mother had the protective charms I gave them, but that was just for that one, life-threatening situation. It wouldn't save her repeatedly.

After running through different options, an idea dawned on me. It might be better at this point to maybe find a bond for Ellie. But it couldn't just be any bond or there wouldn't be any meaning to it. The mana beast needed to be strong enough and protective enough so that it could protect my sister's life...and maybe occasionally discourage the weak-willed boys that were audacious enough to try and woo her.

My lips curled up as I began picturing it. The more I thought about it, the more I came to like the idea.

Hey, it's pretty normal for a caring brother to get his younger sister a pet that could potentially maul anyone that gets within three feet of her... right?

The Beginning After The End – Chapter 88: A Will's Unwillingness

ARTHUR LEYWIN

Tess didn't wake up until late into the afternoon of the day after. Virion had left in the morning to deal with what had happened to their home, and left a note on the other side of my door telling me to take "good care" of Tess until he got things sorted out. It normally would've sounded serious if not for the winking face he crudely drew at the bottom of the note, making me question what exactly Gramps' definition of taking good care of someone was.

And furthermore, what was going on inside his crooked head.

“Grandpa?”

I was meditating on the living room floor with Sylvie still sleeping on my lap when Tess came out, rubbing her half-opened eyes, bedhead ablaze.

“A-Art? Where’s Grandpa?” Flustered after realizing it wasn’t Virion who she had called out to, Tess quickly turned around, frantically matting down her hair.

“Good morning, or rather, good afternoon.” Smiling, I got up and handed her a glass of water. “Your Grandpa went back to your house in the morning to get everything sorted out.”

“Oh. Maybe I should go too... I was the one responsible for all of this, afterall.”

“There’s nothing either one of us could do. Don’t worry too much for now. Virion and your parents will probably be back here later tonight. We’ll go back to my house in Xyrus after making sure everything is okay since we have to go to school tomorrow,” I explained.

“Still... there must be something I could help out— wait, what? I’m going to your house?” She still had her hands glued to the side of her head when she reeled back in surprise, once again unleashing her bedhead in all of its glory.

“Yup. Virion asked me yesterday. It’ll be easier that way, and it’ll probably be more comfortable than staying at this inn.”

“I think my heart would be a lot more comfortable staying here.”

“Well, none of your family will be able to be here with you, so I’m sure Virion would feel a lot more reassured if you stayed with my family until we get to the dorms,” I rebutted.

She remained quiet for a moment before timidly nodding in consent. Even with her hair reminding me of an unkept lion’s mane, she was still somehow cute.

“Kyu!”

Sylvie woke up to the lingering scent of food and leeches a few bites to eat from Tess.

After finishing her breakfast, the princess sat down next to me on the living room floor where I was training and pet Sylvie, who made herself comfortable on Tess’ lap.

“Hehe, so cute,” Tess cooed as she rubbed my formidable draconic Asura’s belly.

“Tess, what did it feel like when you activated the first phase of your beast will?” I asked.

“Umm, it felt like a sudden surge of power spilled out and surrounded me. Then, all of a sudden, I couldn’t really move my body,” Tess explained. “It felt like I was trapped in someone else’s body, but I wasn’t really scared though, for some reason.”

“Mmm,” I nodded.

The beast will wouldn’t attack its host so it made sense for Tess to have a lack of fear. It didn’t make sense, though, for the beast will to have such a strong sense of defiance. Even if she skipped the integration stage, Tess’ body still had fully fused with the beast will. The will might be difficult to control

and to use properly, but it shouldn't have gotten that out of hand. Ironic as it sounded, it felt like the beast will had its own...well, had its own will.

"I want you to rouse the elderwood guardian's beast will." I kneeled down in front of her before instructing.

"W-What? Is that safe?" Tess looked up, her eyes widening.

"It should be; you're not going to initiate the first phase. Just get a sense for the beast will inside of your mana core and let it stream out into the rest of your body. That way, I'll be able to sense more clearly what's going on." I scooted until I was at arm's length of Tess, making the princess shuffle away.

Wasn't it her that so boldly initiated a kiss last time? Why was she being so shy now?

"I'm going to have to place my hand on your abdomen, Tess. Don't move," I sighed, scooting closer.

"You make it sound like touching a girl's belly isn't anything serious," Tess pouted, clicking her tongue.

"It's not if it's for the sake of training."

"Tch..."

As she began meditating, I placed the palm of my hand on her abdomen. Closing my eyes as well, I began examining her mana core. Soon enough, as Tess began to release the innate mana from the beast will, a flood of emerald-green particles of mana flooded over the golden gray specks of wood and wind attribute mana that circulated inside her body.

Tess had a strained look as beads of sweat rolled down her cheeks. Small sparks of mana began bursting out of her body as her cramped face told me she was doing her best from releasing the beast will's power which seemingly wanted to break loose.

"Tessia, it's okay! Stop now!" I hurriedly yelled.

As the princess began trying to recall the beast will back into her mana core, she began convulsing. I put my hand back to her mana core to try and sense the activity going on inside of her body, and I couldn't help but be shocked.

The elderwood guardian's beast will, which occupied Tess' mana core and was integrated with the rest of her body, was fighting back trying to take control over the rest of Tess' innate mana.

What was going on? How could the beast will go against the host's will like this? This was different from Tess actually manifesting the first phase of her beast will and having that go out of control. The beast will's mana particles were still inside of her body when this happened.

A rather crude comparison popped into mind while thinking of this. People of this world didn't really suffer from this, but from my world, non-practitioners who couldn't reinforce their body with ki suffered from diseases and illnesses. While there were horrible diseases that aged the body twice as fast or burned the organs from the inside, I would have to say that the scariest disease would be the Drackins Virus. This virus would spread through the nerves and make the victim lose control of their limbs and eventually, their mind. Since the virus couldn't infect practitioners, it was contained fairly quickly, but even then, the epidemic that lasted a year had over three hundred thousand fatalities.

This phenomenon that was happening to Tess reminded me of something akin to that virus. Just like the Drackins Virus, the beast will's mana particles weren't integrating and reinforcing Tess' body, but instead weakening the mana formed from her own mana core. It didn't seem to the degree of taking over Tess' body and mind at this stage, but it was still eerily comparable.

As the internal battle between Tess' innate mana and her beast will ensued, I could sense the mana levels in her core slowly dwindling. The beast will was clearly less rampant than when we were at the training grounds back in Xyrus Academy; whether that was thanks to the help of Windsom, I couldn't be sure. However, I doubt even Windsom predicted that the elderwood guardian's beast will that I acquired would be such an unpredictable outlier.

As Tess continued to fight, trying to contain the beast will that wasn't even fully released, I gathered some mana into her body as well, making sure to incorporate all four elemental attributes so it wouldn't be rejected, before transferring it directly to her mana core. While I didn't give as much mana to Tess as I did to Prince Curtis back down at the dungeon, I still felt a tangible drain from my core.

Meanwhile, Sylvie circled around us, warily, knowing that something was wrong. She tilted her head and peeked around me, trying to get a better view of what was going on until Tess collapsed on her back, her chest rising and falling from the shortage of breath.

"Well, that didn't go quite as planned," I huffed, leaning back on my arms as well.

"Tell...tell me about it. I don't get what's wrong though. It feels like I'm holding onto a gate, trying to keep some sort rabid monster caged inside from breaking free."

I couldn't help but let out a wry laugh at the accuracy of such a metaphor. Tess' mana core quite literally was serving as the "cage" that kept the rabid beast will from coming loose.

With still a pile of questions unanswered, we decided not to touch the elderwood guardian's beast will for the time being. We were either going to have to find an unconventional way to have her gain control over this power or have her become stronger in order to properly keep the beast will in check.

Grandpa Virion, along with Tessia's parents, Alduin and Merial Eralith, arrived at the inn suite later in the evening. Needless to say, the former King and Queen of the elves were relieved, seeing for themselves that their daughter was safe.

The five of us and Sylvie, who was curled up on my lap, sleeping, situated ourselves on the couches before getting into the topic of what's to come.

We discussed briefly about what happened exactly at the castle, but when Tess tried to chime in, Virion cut her off and explained in her stead. Gramps played the whole thing down, mentioning that part of the explosion was actually his fault and that he was just trying to test the limits of Tess' beast will.

I sat there, perplexed for a moment as to why he might have been hiding the true reason, but when our eyes met, his gaze told me that he would explain later.

It was decided that, while the Eralith Castle was being rebuilt, the family, minus Tess, would stay with Rinia.

Now that was a name that I hadn't heard in a long time. I owed a lot to the granny that had the extremely rare gift of foresight. She was the one that allowed me to make contact with my parents after first arriving at the Kingdom of Elenoir after rescuing Tess at the time.

"Arthur, why don't we go together to Rinia's house before you and Tessia set out for Xyrus? The journey is a bit far after she moved but since you saw her as a child, I'm sure she'd appreciate it if you came by and said hello," Merial chimed. "She is going to be very surprised at how much you've grown."

"I'd like that," I responded back with a nostalgic smile reaching my cheeks.

"Ooh, I haven't seen Grandma Rinia in a long time too!" Tess leaned forward, her expression indicating that she was looking forward to it as well.

"Hmm, while you're at it, having her get a good read on you should be a good idea." Virion's gaze was focused on some random spot on the ground as he pondered at the idea.

Alduin nodded in agreement before saying, "Yes, I think so too. Father, I remember you telling me how Rinia was rather interested in Arthur's future."

After that, it was decided that before leaving for Xyrus early in the afternoon, we'd stop by Grandma Rinia's house, or cottage, to be more precise.

Needless to say, it was odd. I, myself, was sleeping on the same bed with Grandpa Virion while Tess and her parents slept in the other room. I was rather fine with it but sleeping in the same quarters as the royal family of the elves would put anyone else on pins and needles. I still wanted to sleep in the living room, for comfort's sake, but Gramps refused, saying that only through sharing tight quarters did men truly bond.

That and bathing together in the nude...

Supposedly...

Elves have some weird customs.

The Beginning After The End – Chapter 89: A Stroll

ARTHUR LEYWIN'S POV:

As we made our trip to Rinia's cottage, I couldn't help but sigh in awe at how perfect a spring morning it was—simply one of those scenes that you couldn't help but appreciate. As it was just past dawn, the morning air was still cool and crisp. On both sides of the road, bright morning dew on the moss-covered rocks sparkled from the sun's rays peeking through the old trees that towered over us.

The carriage we were riding in hardly shook from the even, marble-like paths smoothed from centuries of use. Sylvie was a ball of excitement as I had to grab her by the tail a couple of times to keep her from jumping out of the carriage to catch the passing butterflies and birds.

"Arthur, I have to say that your bond continues to intrigue me." Alduin Eralith raised an amused brow as Sylvie promptly shot out and grabbed a passing bird with her jaw.

“Now now, leave the boy and his pet alone. In such a vast and mysterious land as ours, you can’t be so surprised at things like this,” Virion chided at his son with a wagging finger.

“I’d normally agree with you as well, Grandfather, but Arthur’s bond really is unique compared to all of the other mana beasts I’ve seen. Even though it’s an infant, its gaze twinkles with intelligence.” Merial leaned in closer to Sylvie, who was still chewing on the bird she took down.

“Don’t forget that Sylvie is super cute too!” Just as Sylvie let out a satisfied belch, Tess picked her up and hugged her.

“Bahaha! I can’t help but worry that my granddaughter will one day choose her precious bond, not by its strength but by its appearance!” Virion howled in laughter, making everyone but the princess snicker in agreement.

The trip was fairly long, even with a mana beast pulling the carriage. Tess soon fell asleep with her head against her mother’s shoulder, as Merial slept alongside her daughter with her head leaning against Tess’.

“Arthur, I told my son already but where we’re headed, it’s not a normal cottage. Rinia chose to isolate herself near the edge of the kingdom. As for why, she wouldn’t tell me, but last time I chose to make an unannounced visit, I almost died from the traps and defenses she had put up,” Virion spoke in a hushed voice.

I raised a brow at Virion’s serious tone. “For what reason does Elder Rinia need to protect herself to this extent?”

“My guess is as good as yours. I told her that we were visiting this time, so it should be safe, but I want you to watch out for any signs of intrusion. The fact that she needed to set up all of these precautions means that there are people out there to be cautious of.”

My mind immediately went to her unique abilities as a deviant, however, no one but a handful of trusted people should’ve known about it.

“Okay.” I nodded solemnly.

Soon after the conversation, Gramps had also fallen asleep with his arms crossed and head bobbing, leaving only my bond, the driver, Tess’ father and myself, awake.

Sylvie had her front paws against the window of the carriage in hopes to catch more unlucky birds, her tail wagging rhythmically.

Alduin had a relaxed look on his aged face as he gazed vacantly at the moving scene outside the carriage. I knew that each of those wrinkles and creases came from the burden of being a king and now a leading figure of the continent.

“I feel like I’ve never had the chance to properly thank you,” he said as his eyes still stayed focused outside the carriage.

“For what, sir?” I replied.

“For taking such good care of my daughter. From what she and my father tells me, Tessia made it out of some dangerous situations thanks to you.” Alduin turned his head and looked at me for a brief moment before revealing a weary smile.

“It’s nothing, sir. Tessia has helped me a lot of times as well.”

“Oh? Like how?” He tilted his head.

I had to think to for a second before responding. “In keeping me sane at times.”

“Not exactly what I expected a thirteen-year-old boy to say, but when it comes to you, I can’t help but see you as an adult.” The former king smirked before shifting his gaze back outside.

“Your words are kind.”

“I somehow feel utterly confident that you will be able to protect my daughter in my and my father’s stead.”

My eyes narrowed in thought at the meaning of his statement, but before I could say anything, Alduin just chuckled and waved his hand dismissively.

“Just an overprotective father’s thoughts running wild. Don’t mind me, Arthur... but say, have you ever thought of one day marrying Tess?”

“Sir?” I said, taken aback by the sudden shift in course of this conversation.

“I mean, sure, she’s a bit rough around the edges and Merial and I may have spoiled her a bit, but she’s a good girl! I bet she’ll be quite the looker given a few years.”

“I thought that traditionally, elves dated and married a lot later—”

“Ha! Tradition? At how fast Dicathen is changing, there’s no room for tradition,” Alduin scoffed. He then bent forward, leaning his arms on his knees. “Arthur, do you like my daughter?”

There was a lingering silence as I thought about my words carefully. Despite his amiable attitude and the casual atmosphere inside the carriage, Alduin was still the acting king of Elenoir. There was no denying that my attitude and care toward the elf princess was different from anyone else’s, but it was still impossible for me to ever assuredly act on those feelings at this stage. There were times when I was surprised at my own reflection because of how young I was; to be able to overcome the mental boundary of age that I subconsciously put up myself would mean I would have to stop seeing Tessia as a girl and see her as a woman.

Locking gazes with Tessia’s father, I answered with confidence. “I do, but I also find myself lacking to confidently say I know what ‘like’ and ‘love’ actually mean. I hope the answer will come with time, but until then I’d like to improve myself before thinking of asking for your daughter’s hand in marriage.”

“Good answer.” The king nodded thoughtfully. “You have your head in the right place despite the lack of years under your belt.”

“More so than you when you were his age,” a soft voice chimed from beside Alduin.

“You were awake, dear?” the king asked with an expression as if he’d been caught sneaking into the desserts cabinet.

“Just for the last bit of your little ‘man talk,’” she smiled.

‘Hehe, I knew Papa liked Mama.’ Sylvie’s voice rang in my head, surprising me.

I turned to the queen, afraid that Tess might’ve heard as well, but fortunately it seemed that unlike her mother, Tessia was a rather heavy sleeper.

TESSIA ERALITH’S POV:

He admitted it! I almost shouted out loud in excitement.

Arthur finally said it! He said he likes me. Well... he said ‘I do’ after he was asked, but that’s good enough!

Way to go, Dad!

Oh no, keep your eyes shut, Tess... keep your eyes shut.

Slow down your breathing.

Shoot, I wonder if he can hear how fast my heart is beating. His hearing can’t be that good, right?

I was so happy that I woke up when I did. I wasn’t going to pretend to be asleep at first, but I got scared when I heard Father talking about me.

He’s so cruel... how can he say that I’m rough around the edges...

...and that I’m spoiled! I’m not spoiled!

It would be embarrassing to wake up just then, so I kept my eyes closed, but who would’ve thought that my father would ask if Arthur liked me... and that Arthur would actually admit it!

He’d only said that once, and that was after I got angry at him. At that time, he surprised me when he kissed me all of a sudden.

Hehe...

Oh no, don’t smile, Tess.

“We’re here, Tess. Come on, now, wake up.” My father’s voice saved me as he gently shook my shoulder.

“Mmm... We’re here already?” I made my voice more wispy, trying to sound like I had just woken up.

I couldn’t look at Arthur in the eye when he turned his gaze to me so I quickly got out of the carriage and stretched.

“Ahhh! That was a good nap!” I said a little more loudly than I needed to.

Sylvie hopped out of the carriage after me and stretched as well, opening her mouth in an audible yawn before darting her head, taking in her new surroundings.

I looked around too, but I was confused when I didn't see a cottage, or any sort of sign that a person lived here. All that surrounded us were trees and grass, with thick bushes that blocked any sort of path there might've been.

"Umm, Grandpa, are you sure we're in the right place?" I asked as I continued searching for anything remotely close to a house.

"We have to walk a bit further, but it's near here. Let's go." Grandpa took the lead with my father and Arthur following close behind, while Mother ushered me forward as well.

Sylvie scampered alongside me, her head darting back and forth in different directions, as if it sensed something, making me a bit nervous.

As we made our way deeper into the forest, the number of branches we had to maneuver around and curtains of vines we had to push aside increased. I wanted to ask if we were really going in the right direction but the determined and serious look on everyone's faces made me swallow my complaints.

"Honey? Is something wrong? The atmosphere is a bit chilly..." Mother's voice trailed off as she hesitantly followed behind Father and Grandpa next to me.

"Mm? Ah, yes. Everything is fine! Just being cautious is all." My father seemed to have snapped out of his thoughts at the sound of Mother's words.

"Stop." Arthur suddenly put up his hand abruptly, his other hand gripping the hilt of his sword that I didn't even notice he had until now. Grandpa, who was beside him, froze, lowering himself as Father carefully inched his way towards us.

I could hear it now in the dead silence.

The faint rustle of leaves that seemed to be getting closer to us.

Snap.

Grandpa whipped his body toward the direction of the sound.

I noticed myself scooting towards Mother for protection. With my mana core unstable because of my beast will, I felt defenseless for the first time in a long while.

My mother was also wary at this point. Both she and Father had their weapons out and at the ready. My mother's thin wand glimmered in a rose gold hue as my father's favorite saber was already unsheathed.

Snap!

The sound was a lot closer this time and it seemed to be coming from our right. Unknowingly, I glanced at Arthur to find his eyes on me, probably making sure I was alright. Sylvie was right next to him with her white fur on its ends, making her look bigger.

And then we all saw it. The curtain of vines to our right began rustling and a hunched figure covered in shade stepped out from the dense forest.

I could tell everyone was on their toes, ready to retaliate at whatever came out, but before anyone had the chance to, a clear voice rang from the shadowed figure.

“What are you lot doing out here looking like fools? Come on, you guys are late!”

The shadowed figure finally stepped into a ray of light that peeked through the trees, revealing an all too familiar figure.

“Grandma Rinia!” I couldn’t help but exclaim in relief.

The Beginning After The End – Chapter 90: A Cursed Blessing

ARTHUR LEYWIN’S POV:

Supposedly, Grandma Rinia’s cottage wasn’t too much farther from where we were. After our brief greetings and a firm hug from the aged elf that I had come to appreciate, we made our way to her dwelling place.

“You’ve grown into quite the handsome young lad, Arthur. If I was just a hundred years younger, I might’ve snatched you up for myself,” Rinia teased.

It was disturbing to say the least to hear this from a woman who was several decades older than me, but since it came from her, I just grinned back.

“Well, I’d have to see how you looked when you were a hundred years younger.”

“Hmph! Ask Virion how stunning I was! Men would swarm over me as soon as I was in their sights!” Rinia placed one hand on her hip and used her other to flip her braided hair.

“It’s true, Arthur. My mother would tell me how all of the girls her age would be jealous of Aunt Rinia,” Tess’ mother giggled.

“Bah! She was above average at best!” Virion waved off.

“Well, of course there was only one girl to have ever caught Virion’s eye...” Rinia’s voice trailed off and by the look on her face, she seemed to have regretted bringing it up.

I looked around, completely lost. The gloomy forest we were treading through seemed all the more dismal by the sudden change in the air. I glanced at Tess and she seemed uncomfortable, but more so confused than depressed like everyone else.

“...I’m sorry, Virion. I was a bit insensitive.” Rinia placed a hand on Virion’s sunken shoulder.

“It’s... It’s fine. I should be the one who’s sorry. I know how you felt as well,” he dismissed.

We continued on with only the crunching of fallen leaves and the snapping of twigs filling the silence. My gaze was focused on Sylvie, who was having a blast looking for lifeforms underneath the moss-covered rocks and logs.

As her tail wagged furiously in excitement, I couldn’t help but let out a small smile in content, despite the sullen atmosphere.

Sneaking a quick peek at Gramps, my mind started itching with questions that I knew I shouldn’t ask. Rinia, who apparently saw this, gently placed her hand on my shoulder and gave me a strained smile.

As we stepped into a small clearing, the roaring sound of running water filled our ears. It was as if the trees surrounding this area had acted as a barrier, blocking off all the sound. In view, we could now see a wide waterfall cascading down a marble white cliff into a small pool of water about six meters in diameter.

“Wow, I didn’t know a place like this existed,” Tess gaped in awe.

“Father, wasn’t this the place you used to take me to when I was a child?” Alduin asked while he looked around.

“I see you still remember. Yes, you used to love coming to this place.” Virion let out a small smile as he reminisced.

“It’s beautiful...” Merial breathed.

It was beautiful, indeed.

There wasn’t much sunlight that was able to reach this small clearing, making the area seem more surreal. The thin rays of light that were able to peek through the thick tree tops created spotlights that made the moss, grass, and all of the plant life glimmer. The waterfall streamed down the white cliff without any intrusion, making it a clear curtain of water.

“We’re here.” Rinia stated as she stepped up.

Wordlessly, we all followed her as I half-expected her to conjure a cottage from the ground.

It wasn’t as fancy as that, though. Instead Rinia let out a few inaudible chants with her hands raised, lifting roots from underneath the pond into a makeshift bridge leading into the waterfall.

Carefully stepping onto the grimy roots, Rinia took the lead with us following close behind. With a wave of her arm, she swept the waterfall to the side. However, before doing anything else, she looked around, as if to make sure no one was spying on us.

After letting out a sharp breath, Rinia placed her hand on the cliff behind the waterfall, which now started to glow with unrecognizable runes.

Just like that, the white marble cliff opened up like a sliding door to reveal a passage deeper inside.

“Don’t conjure up any light. We’ll make our way through the dark,” instructed Rinia, as if directly referring to me.

I lost track of how many turns we made, relying only on Rinia’s voice as our guide.

“Left.”

“Right.”

“Right.”

“Left.”

Finally we could see a flickering light at the end of the umpteenth leg of the tunnel.

“Welcome to my little cottage.”

With the sparse amount of light, I could barely make out the faint smile Rinia had.

By this time, I had no idea where we were, but the homey little hut that couldn't be any bigger than a single room in the Eralith Family's castle was welcoming to my eyes.

“Whew.” Tessia squatted down as she was able to finally release her tension.

“This...this is quite the place, Aunt Rinia.” Alduin slid his hand against the wall of the cave the hut was in.

“Where are we?” I couldn't help but ask as I inspected our surroundings as well.

“Somewhere in the elf kingdom,” was all she said as she made her way into her hut.

Lighted by a few dim shining orbs in the corners of the cave, the place Rinia called home reminded me of some sort of dungeon used to hold the worst criminals, not a place where a close friend of the royal family would reside.

“I'm sure you have your reasons, Aunt Rinia, but was it really necessary to shut yourself in a place like this?” Merial frowned as her eyes focused on the hut Rinia just went inside.

“Just an old lady being overly cautious. Don't mind me! It's actually quite cozy once you get used to it.” Rinia's head popped out of the hut's sheet door.

“Can I see inside too?” Tess had Sylvie wrapped in her arms as she curiously eyed the interior of the hut.

“Of course! Everyone, come inside.” Rinia waved us in.

We all looked at each other in doubt, but Virion just herded us all in while saying, “Come now, the place isn't going to eat you up. It's quite roomy inside, despite its appearance. Let's get something to drink! I'm quite famished.”

Once we settled down into the minimally designed disaster shelter that was Rinia's new home, I sunk into the couch. Leaning my head on my hand, I must've nodded off because when I woke up, everyone was also asleep.

Rubbing my eyes, I got up to see that Rinia was the only one still awake, sipping on something that smelled like an herb tonic.

“They won't be awake for a while, Arthur. Let's have a talk,” Rinia said simply without even looking at me. She gestured for me to sit in the chair across from her as she continued sipping on her tea.

“Well, from how you probably drugged everyone but me, I'm guessing this is something that only I can know?” My eyes narrowed, but I trusted Rinia. Besides, if she wanted to kill us, I was sure that with her powers of foresight, she already could've done so.

Wordlessly, I sat down and leaned back, waiting for the aged elf to speak.

“Despite the unforeseen circumstances, you're quite composed, Arthur.” Rinia's tone seemed to say she expected this.

“I'm sure if you wanted the worse to happen, it would've happened already,” I shrugged.

“Mm.”

“...”

“A logical assumption,” nodded Rinia. “Now, where do I begin?” she sighed. “Well, let’s begin with a small lesson on my powers as a Diviner.”

My ears perked up at this. Learning about a rare deviant form of magic didn’t come often, as textbooks only held a limited amount of information about them.

Noticing the interest on my face, Rinia continued. “As you may know, unlike regular mages who draw forth power from the mana particles in the atmosphere, deviants have to find their own source of power to fuel their magic.”

I nodded in agreement.

“For example, your mother, an Emitter, has the ability to heal herself and others in a way elemental recovery spells can’t compare to.”

I nodded to this as well. There were various recovery spells that could be learned by water, wind, and plant attribute mages. Unfortunately, fire and earth didn’t have any innate healing attributes, so it was impossible to create a recovery spell out of them. All in all, though, the recovery spells were still weak and couldn’t compare to the healing that Emitters were capable of.

“Emitters have mana cores that naturally accumulate a special type of mana that is used to power their spells. Throughout my life, I’ve met quite a few deviants, each with unique properties in their magic. They all have one thing in common though, different from an elemental deviant such as yourself. Each of the deviants have their own pool of mana that they use to power their deviant magic.” She looked a little absent-minded as she said this.

“It must be an inconvenience for them since they can’t draw in mana from the atmosphere,” I added.

“It sure is. After interviewing many deviants, they would all tell me how difficult it was to learn even basic elemental spells since they did not have mana cores that could harness the mana particles in the atmosphere. However, with their deviant powers, it made up for this handicap.”

There was a moment of silence where I could only hear the soft snoring of Sylvie in Tess’ arms before Rinia spoke again.

“As for Diviners, it’s quite different. First of all, our powers can awaken at any point in our lives, which is quite different from conventional mages and other deviants. Our powers mostly come in erratic bursts where, quite often, blurred images and clips of the future simply flash through my mind. Sometimes they’d be useful, but most of the time, they were too vague and minute to make anything out of. These little flashes of the future don’t expend any mana at all, actually.”

I stayed silent, an eerie feeling creeping up on me.

“If you were to sense my mana core, I actually have quite a normal mana core, capable of harnessing and refining the mana particles in the atmosphere, which is why I’m quite adept at water attribute magic myself,” Rinia exclaimed mockingly. “Doesn’t seem like a very useful power if I can’t control it, now does it?” she continued.

“Then what about the the spell that you used to allow me to locate my parents and even speak to them when I was little?” I questioned.

“Ah, that’s a nifty little spell I made that involves my unique powers as a Diviner, but not really. You see, Arthur, true divination is reading the future—knowing when and where something is going to happen.”

I was getting lost. “Then if that is your true power as a Diviner and you said your mana core doesn’t power that magic, how do you—”

“With my own lifespan,” she cursed.

“We Diviners shorten our own lifespans each time we choose to consciously look into the future. That is the true power of a Diviner. Everything else are just useful little spells that can’t be considered anything more than hat tricks.”

I sat there, wide-eyed, not knowing how to respond.

“What we talked about earlier, Virion’s only love and wife, was another rare Diviner that was much more powerful than I was. Her unconscious divinations and prophecies would be much longer, much more detailed than mine, and much more frequent at that.” Rinia’s reminiscent smile faded as she continued speaking.

“Coupled with her physical beauty and graceful temperament, she was the envy of every female elf of our generation. She was the pride of our kingdom and an idol to the citizens.

“Things were looking perfect as she fell in love with Virion and the two got married in a beautiful ceremony. However, Fate wasn’t as kind to her as everyone thought.”

I couldn’t help but grimace at the tone of this tragedy-in-happening.

“At this time, the war between the Kingdom of Sapin and Elenoir had begun to die down, with the talk of a treaty in the air. However, the King of Sapin at the time made a last ditch effort to do as much damage to our kingdom as possible before the signing of the treaty. He carried out a plan to extinguish the future heir to the throne.”

“You mean...”

“Yes, Virion was the sole target of an assassination mission carried out by the King himself,” Rinia spoke in almost a whisper.

“...”

“Mockingly, his wife was repeatedly tormented by visions of Virion’s death. Her unconscious prophecies told her little of how Virion would die and every time she did something to try and change the future, the outcome only led to a different cause of death. Virion knew the toll of his wife using her powers, but she did so anyway behind his back, out of desperation to keep him from his inevitable death.”

“Every time I use my powers to look into the future, I can feel the days, weeks, sometimes even months being drained out of my body. I could only imagine how terrible it must’ve been for her to repeatedly use this cursed power for the one she loved.”

I didn't know what to say, and even if I did, it would have been insensitive to say, coming from someone who didn't know what it felt like.

Rinia's eyes glistened from the tears that she had been holding back.

"In the end, she was able to keep Virion alive long enough for the peace treaty to be signed, but having burned up so much of her lifespan to protect the man she loved, she died a few months after in his arms with her youthful, beautiful appearance replaced with an aged, sickly elder."

"Do you know who that Diviner was, Arthur?" She looked up with a stream of tears rolling down her right cheek.

"She was my sister."