

After The End 91

The Beginning After The End – Chapter 91: The Start

ARTHUR LEYWIN'S POV:

Her words rang out in my ear like a giant gong that was rung at the beginning of every year. They say the people with the widest smiles hide the most pain in their hearts. I shifted my gaze over to the sleeping Virion and remembered the times that he joked around with his cheeky grin.

I had no idea the pain that he had gone through...

I felt like some pubescent teenager that thought the world hated him. I was ignorant of the fact that there were others who might've suffered from deeper pains than I had.

No words left my mouth after what Rinia said, only focusing on the ever so slight tremble of my fingers.

"The reason I bring this up isn't to elicit pity or sorrow from you. I tell you this so that you'll realize the gravity of what I'm about to inform you of next." There was a stern conviction in her voice that made me look back up.

Elder Rinia paused, as if readying her heart before she spoke. "I used my powers to intentionally look into your future, Arthur."

After all she told me, what she just said weighed on me all the more. "What? Wh-why?" was all I could stammer out before Sylvie sleepily walked towards me and hopped onto my lap, falling asleep again, leaving the both of us with a brow raised.

"Seems like your bond is immune to the herbs I gave her," she chuckled.

"Yeah, she probably just fell asleep naturally," I replied with a half grin.

"Well, continuing on, even before the day I first met you when you were a child, I had been getting glimpses of your future; never enough to make sense of it, but it was odd to have so many visions of a specific person. It has never happened before." Rinia shifted in her seat.

"As you may already be aware, Arthur, things are changing on this continent. Dicathen is going through a new era. We've already experienced the beginning of it with the unity of the three Kingdoms and the unveiling of the Six Lances, but that's just the beginning. Through all of these changes that are going to happen, you always seem to be in the center of them somehow, Arthur." The elderly Diviner locked eyes with mine.

"Then moving to this remote hideout..." I started to say.

She just gave me a slight nod. "With the knowledge I gained from looking into the future... your future, it seems like I've made some enemies."

"What exactly is it that you learned from looking into my future?" I asked.

"Here's the tricky part. Telling you too much of what I saw can affect even the outcomes you want. On the other hand, telling you too little defeats the point of me looking into the future in order to find a better outcome," she sighed.

“How do you feel though, Rinia? You just gave up some of your life in order to see my future... are you okay?” I couldn’t help but frown.

“I’ll be fine. I’ve lived long enough, anyway. I might as well use some of it to help the future.” Rinia waved her hand dismissively.

“I hate sounding like some old fortune teller warning the hero to be careful and other sorts of generic advice that he can pick up from anyone, but it pains me to say that I can only do that much.” I could tell she was trying to make light of the situation to ease my guilt.

“Arthur...” Rinia’s tone became serious, almost foreboding, “You will face many hardships. Whichever future you decide, that will remain constant. You will have enemies and you will have obstructions in your path, but through all of that, what I can leave you with is that you need to have an anchor, an end goal. What is it you want to accomplish in your life? That will be what determines your path.”

This sounded more like a motivational speech than a prophecy, but as if she had read my mind, Rinia continued.

“Be grounded, Arthur, and I’ll leave you with these two things. One: people do bad things for good reasons, so don’t just take them for what they do on the surface and keep your mind sharp. Two: oftentimes, the scariest enemy isn’t the one on the throne, leading the forces, but the abandoned soldier that has nothing to lose; for that, stay wary and don’t be overconfident.” Rinia’s voice became a soft whisper as she warned me, leaving an uncomfortable silence in the room.

“I’m sorry I can’t say anything more, but all I can say is to follow and trust your instincts. You are a particularly sharp fellow and I know you’ll make the right choices, but sometimes, the right choice isn’t always the best choice.”

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The talk with Rinia ended, leaving me with a rather bad taste in my mouth, like one would get after taking a spoonful of a bitter tonic. Helpful and necessary, but bitter nonetheless.

Rinia woke everyone up soon after, with me pretending to have been asleep with them as well. Rinia made some excuse that she accidentally mixed in some herbs for relaxation that were a lot stronger than she anticipated. No one seemed to mind and we continued on with a light lunch that Rinia prepared out of edible plants and mushrooms. It tasted good despite the lack of meat, but by Sylvie’s reaction, I’m sure she would disagree.

It was pretty late in the afternoon by the time we finished eating and had to get on our way. A bigger surprise than the fact that Rinia’s home was in the center of a mountainside cliff was the fact that, through a secret door and passage, she had her own teleportation gate.

Since teleportation gates were made in ancient times, supposedly with the help of the deities, or Asuras, as I now know, it wasn’t possible to make any more. Virion wasn’t as surprised as everyone else, including me, but knowing Rinia’s powers, I could only shrug and realize that this was something within her abilities.

After saying our goodbyes, Tess, Sylvie, and I went through the gate. Along with the dizzy feeling after crossing, we were welcomed back to the edge of Xyrus City by guards that had their spears pointed at us.

After realizing that the unknown crossers were teens who had the Xyrus Academy uniforms on, they quickly lowered their weapons.

“We apologize, the portal you were coming from was read as an unknown gate, so we didn’t know who or what would pop out from the other side. It’s rare, but there have been times when mana beasts accidentally stumble through a teleportation gate somewhere deep in the Beast Glades,” one of the guards, that seemed to be the leader, said, although his eyes still watched us with a studying gaze.

“It’s fine. We came from one of the other cities of Elenoir and the guard did mention that he was having troubles with the gate from time to time,” I shrugged.

With an understanding nod, the guards let us go and since there was no carriage waiting for us, the three of us walked to the nearest stop and found a carriage to take us. The sun was already setting and I could see the color distortion in the sky as the Aurora Constellate was soon coming to its peak. It was a lot easier to see it from the floating city than through the dense trees in Elenoir.

“Wow, the Aurora Constellate really is beautiful every time you see it,” Tess said in awe.

“Kyu~” ‘The sky is colorful!’ Sylvie also sat at the edge of the carriage, her small head gazed up in appreciation.

When we made it back to the Helstea Manor, Sylvie scurried up the stairs leading to the door and scratched at it. As Tess and I followed her up, the door opened, revealing a person that I didn’t expect to see.

“Jasmine?!” I stopped where I stood and gasped.

“Long time no see,” my mentor from my adventurer days replied, with the only visible sign on her expressionless face that she was happy to see me, the slight grin she had.

Before I had the chance to say anything more, the rest of the Twin Horns came, one by one, each with a big grin on their faces as they saw me with a girl they’d never seen before.

“You’ve grown,” Durden said with a warm smile on his wide, tanned face.

“Look who we have here! Mr. Hotshot bringing home a lady,” Adam Krensh, the wild-looking vagabond spear user cooed, leaning on the edge of the doorframe.

“Wow, look who’s become more of a man.” Helen Shard, the archer, still as charismatic as before, winked at me.

While they all stayed at the top of the stairs, waiting for us to come up, Angela hopped down the stairs herself and picked me up in a bear hug.

“Look how cute you’ve gotten!!” she squealed as she waved me around, my legs dragging helplessly on the cement stairs since she was too short to completely pick me up off the ground.

“Mmmfph mmmh!” Any hopes to articulate words failed as the abyss of her well-endowed bosom absorbed my face.

“I-I think you should let go...” I heard Tess stammer out as she tugged on the side of my uniform.

“Look who we have here! Aren’t you the cutest little elf!” Angela Rose put me down like discarded waste and picked up Tess, who let out a squeal in surprise.

My family soon came out and greeted us with open arms with my sister, Eleanor, who already had Sylvie in her arms.

I was eager to catch up with the Twin Horns over dinner since I hadn’t seen them in over a year, but I could tell Tess was kind of uncomfortable with all of this. She already felt a bit out of place being in my home, but with the unexpected guests that she’d never seen before, she was feeling all the more tense and awkward.

My mother and sister tried to make her feel more comfortable, but since she was being awkward with me as well for some reason, she couldn’t take it, and told everyone, after apologizing, that she had to go back to school first for some Student Council work that she was sorely behind on.

“Are you really going back to the academy?” I asked.

“I’ve missed too much school and work has probably piled up by now. Thank you guys for your hospitality and I’m sorry I couldn’t stay longer.” Tess made a curt bow and followed after the driver that came to get her.

I went outside with her, uncertain if I should go with her or not.

“Don’t worry about me! I’ll admit it was a bit uncomfortable for me in there, but that’s not the main reason I’m going back. I really am behind on Student Council work and I feel bad since even Lilia is still at school. It wouldn’t be right of me to be in her home relaxing while she’s working, right?” Tess gave me a reassuring smile.

“You’re right, but I’m just worried since Gramps said that you still had to rest. Your mana core still is a bit unstable, even with the seal that Rinia gave you before we left. I’d just feel more comfortable if I was near you in case something happened.” I scratched my head, a rather doubtful feeling itching up on me.

“I have no reason to use magic at the academy for the time being anyways. Besides, you’re coming back to school tomorrow. I think I’ll be able to survive until then,” she gave me a playful wink, distilling the previous awkwardness she had.

“Alright, but be careful.” I lightly bonked her head, getting a light punch in the stomach in reply.

TESSIA ERALITH’S POV:

“Whew.” It was getting harder and harder to keep a straight face in front of Arthur. If I;d stayed and talked to him any longer, I felt like my face was going to burn like a candle.

My body felt out of sync because of my mana core; It affected my body, as if somebody tilted the world just slightly enough to throw me off balance, but I didn’t tell Arthur this since he’d just get overly worried.

After closing my eyes for what seemed like a couple of seconds, I was already close to the school gate.

“Thank you!” I said to the driver.

He gave me a friendly nod in reply, tipping his hat, before driving back toward Lilia’s house.

Right after stepping through the barrier and entering the gate, the atmosphere seemed to have changed drastically. My body tensed immediately, as if signaling my brain that there was danger nearby.

“Hoho! You’re here...ALONE? Pfft! This is going to be easier than I thought! Yes, it is!”

The throaty voice surprised me. I immediately whipped my head toward the source of the voice.

“Lucas? Lucas Wykes?” I gaped.

It surely was Lucas, but something was off... well, a lot of him was off. His skin was gray, first off, and the way his body spasmed randomly made him look more like a rabid monster than a student.

I wanted to move, but I couldn’t. The pressure and bloodlust he was giving off didn’t allow me too. All my body could do in response was shiver.

“Hehe... I can’t believe you’re here alone, no I can’t! It’s nice seeing you again, Princess! As beautiful as ever, yes you are!” Lucas approached me with jagged steps.

This wasn’t Lucas anymore... The feeling I got from him was more of a deranged mana beast than his usual egotistical self.

Seeing the expression on my face, his face tilted as he revealed a toothy grin. “Why don’t you play with me until Arthur gets here?”

The Beginning After The End – Chapter 92: Collapse of Xyrus

ARTHUR LEYWIN’S POV:

Tess leaving for school left me with a rather uneasy feeling, but, needless to say, we still enjoyed the night. The Helstea Manor was in a festive mood, with barrels of liquor brought up from the cellar by Vincent himself. Lilia’s father was getting the most enjoyment out of this, along with my father, who were both in an inebriated state before I even got home. It turned out that the Twin Horns had made a detour on their series of expeditions in the Beast Glades to visit us during the Aurora Constellate. It meant a lot to my parents just being able to see their old comrades again and share a drink or two as a toast to old times and embarrassing memories.

After my father and Vincent, Adam Krensh was the next to become intoxicated, his flushed cheeks almost matching his fiery red hair. It was rather fascinating witnessing everyone’s alcohol-induced habits since my mother and Tabitha wouldn’t allow me to drink alongside them. Adam was your typical loud and rowdy drunk, seeming to lose enough coordination for an infant to be able to wrestle him to the ground and win.

Angela Rose began to lose all sense of personal space as she conversed with me with her cheeks stuck to mine. It didn’t help that every spoken word was accompanied by two or three hiccups, making it almost

impossible to decipher what she was trying to say. Tabitha ended up having to peel her off of me and 'kindly' escort the coquettish mage up the stairs by the back of her collar.

I had a hard time containing my laughter while Durden Walker soon became drunk as well. What surprised me the most was when he opened his eyes. The usual narrow shapes that looked more like slits became a stern mono-lidded dictator's surprised expression. It didn't help that his eyebrows that were normally slanted down were now furrowed into an upward tilt, making his overall expression a mixture of intense focus and uncontrollable surprise. He would take on this gruff commanding tone when speaking, and for the past hour or so before passing out, he was spouting out training drills to one of the empty barrels of beer while participating in the exercises himself.

I couldn't tell whether my former guardian, Jasmine Flamesworth, was drunk or not until she came up, eyes glossy and unfocused, and started repeating to me how much she thought of me and how worried she was as to whether or not I was adjusting to school well. Eventually, everyone retired to their respective rooms. Mother towed my father, who was cradling a bottle of what smelled like whiskey as if it were a newborn, back into their room. Tabitha did the same for her husband as well. My sister went to sleep with Sylvie quite a while ago in her room, leaving only Helen Shard, the leader of the Twin Horns, and me in the war zone that was once a dining room.

"Quite the party, wasn't it? I'm sure this wasn't exactly how you pictured your reunion with us to go," Helen let out a contained giggle.

I laughed in response. "With everything that's been going on these days, it was nice seeing everyone let loose."

"Your parents told us briefly about everything that has happened to you since we were gone. You seem to be doing a fairly good job of taking on your father's role in worrying your mother." The faint smirk that curled on Helen's lips suggested she was reminiscing the past.

"It seems to be the one skill that I seem to be getting better at without even trying."

"If only it were like that for me with mana manipulation," Helen sighed, making us both laugh.

We moved to the living room after the maids started showing up and cleaning the dining room. There, we sat with only a coffee table separating us as we continued talking and catching each other up on what had happened in our respective lives.

It was the first time I'd talked to Helen for this long, but it was comfortable, and she talked to me as if she were talking to an adult, not someone who had barely hit his or her teens. She had an eloquent way of speaking that wasn't usual for an adventurer; she seemed more suited to lead strategic meetings, not be on the front lines, fighting.

"If you don't mind me asking, Arthur, what level is your mana core? I can't seem to even sense your level anymore." Helen lifted her feet from the coffee table and leaned forward as she asked this.

"Solid Yellow," I answered simply. I didn't want to sugarcoat or try to downplay my level to someone as observant as Helen.

"I see. Congratulations, sincerely." Helen had a mixed expression on her face, one where she was trying to hide her disappointment, but failed. She wasn't disappointed in me, but herself, because even though she more than double my age, I had surpassed her by quite a bit.

"It seems like you are made for bigger and greater things, Arthur. With the discovery of a new continent and all, I suspect that this small academy will only be able to hold you down for so long. We should get some rest." She gave me a smile that didn't reach her eyes and left after giving me a firm pat on the shoulders.

Collapsing on my bed without the energy or will to even wash, I laid there, thinking about everything that had happened in my life. Was it just a coincidence that I was sent, or actually born into this world as it was going through so much change?

Was I really some cliché protagonist from a bedtime fairy tale that they always read to us at the orphanage? I couldn't help but scoff at the thought of being some bored god's source of entertainment as he toyed with my life in the name of my being 'The Chosen One.'

Was I in the hands of some god as a chess piece to make the world run as he saw fit? I squeezed my eyes shut, hoping that would help me get rid of these thoughts. The thought of my fate being under someone else's control didn't sit right with me. Turning to my side, I chose to dust these fears away... life was already so unexpected, why make it more complicated?

ELIJAH KNIGHT'S POV:

"Get down!" I roared as I conjured an earthen wall between the mana beasts and the other students behind me.

"ATTENTION RENOWNED STUDENTS OF XYRUS ACADEMY!" a rather high-pitched grating voice echoed throughout the campus. "AS YOU MAY ALL BE AWARE, YOUR INSTITUTION IS CURRENTLY UNDER ATTACK BY MY LITTLE PETS. NO NEED TO FEAR FOR I AM BOTH JUST AND MERCIFUL!" The voice seemed to taunt us as he said this because there was a dwarven student in the jaws of a discolored black-fanged wolf, a B class mana beast.

Even as I conjured up a rock spear underneath the belly of the black-fanged wolf, it still had the time to take the student's life before collapsing. Gnashing my teeth, I looked away from the dimming gaze of the dwarf that pleaded with his eyes before passing away. If I didn't have experience as an adventurer, I would've thrown up as the student's insides spilled from the fatal wound caused by the mana beast.

Instead, I calmed myself, using a brief meditation technique that I had learned from class that steadied the flow from my mana core before scouting for any other students to save.

"HUMAN STUDENTS, AS LONG AS YOU RAISE BOTH YOUR HANDS AND SWEAR YOUR ALLEGIANCE TO ME, THE MANA BEASTS WILL NOT ATTACK YOU! ELVES AND DWARVES, DO NOT STRUGGLE AND ALLOW MY PETS TO DESTROY YOUR MANA CORE AND YOU WILL BE FREE TO LEAVE!" The voice let out a deranged laugh that sent a shiver down my spine. It was enjoying the carnage that was going on in this school that had been so peaceful just hours before.

Although the radical group had been escalating their terroristic activity, this was on a completely different level. It happened so suddenly that there was no way to prepare for an event like this. As far as

I could tell at this point was that this stage of their plan had been meticulously executed. There were no places to escape to and no way to call for help.

The once clear barrier formation that kept any intruders, including mana beasts, from entering the campus had already turned into a translucent red cage, making the sky look like it was dipped in blood, keeping anyone or anything from leaving.

I didn't know who the voice belonged to, but his motives were clear. He was willing to take human captives, but wanted all nonhuman mages either dead or incapacitated. I could see pillars of smoke from different buildings of the academy where fights were happening. From time to time, I locked eyes with some of the Disciplinary Committee members as they were fighting off several mana beasts, acknowledging each other since we had no time to brief each other on the situation elsewhere.

There were obviously traitors in the academy, because some of the professors were now being held off by other professors while cloaked figures, as well as the mana beasts, were taking care of the students.

It was strange; I'd seen some of the mana beasts while I was an adventurer, but the only thing different about them was the coloration, or lack of color to be more exact. Except for their matching red eyes, all of the mana beasts that flooded Xyrus Academy looked like they had had their colors drained, leaving them in different hues of gray.

I couldn't tell how many hours had passed since the invasion started, but there were no signs of help arriving for some reason, like we were closed off from the rest of Xyrus.

I trudged on through the campus quad where bodies laid limp and pools of blood formed around them. This academy was supposed to be a safe haven for future mages of this continent. It pissed me off more than anything that there hadn't been proper measures implemented for this type of scenario. Since the unification of the three Kingdoms, did The Council not think that there would be enemies?

Just as I was about to follow after a cloaked figure into one of the alchemy labs, a throaty growl caught my attention enough to avoid a thorned growler's jaw. Unfortunately, I couldn't avoid its pounce and was hammered into the ground hard enough to knock the wind out of me.

"Grrrrr," as the giant, furry lizard-shaped mana beast's saliva drenched my uniform, its red eyes were staring at me, as if waiting for me to do something.

"Screw off!" I grunted as I simultaneously conjured a pillar from the ground, launching the two-meter long mana beast in the air before it flipped agilely to regain its ground.

Before I had the chance to do anything more, a sword flew down from the sky, skewering the thorned growler's head to the ground. The mana beast squirmed helplessly for a couple of seconds before its body also sank to the ground lifelessly.

"Thanks," I grunted, too tired for pleasant formalities. It was Curtis Glayder who came down from the top of a nearby statue to retrieve his weapon, his bond, a world lion, following briskly behind him.

"No problem. You should get somewhere safe until we get reinforcements. It's too dangerous out here in the open," he said, nodding back.



“I’ll be fine. There are too many enemies for you guys to handle while I hide. I can still help.” I bandaged my bleeding arm that had been cut open just now with a torn sleeve and turned my back to follow after the cloaked figure.

Suddenly, a sound that could only have been amplified with mana boomed like thunder. I couldn’t even hear myself scream as both Curtis and I reeled in pain. The ear-numbing ring from the watchtower’s bell didn’t reverberate in my chest. I felt it in my feet as the whole earth shook from it.

The Beginning After The End – Chapter 92: Bird’s Cage

ELIJAH KNIGHT’S POV:

As the ear-splitting sound of the bell tower faded into a dull ring, the owner of the same grating voice, who was most likely the cause of all this, cleared his throat before speaking.

“AHEM! TESTING... AH AH... PERFECT!” The sound was coming from the bell tower near the center of campus. “STUDENTS AND FACULTY MEMBERS OF XYRUS ACADEMY—I WOULD LIKE TO WELCOME ALL OF YOU TO JOIN US FOR THE FINAL CEREMONY. I ADVISE EVERY ONE OF YOU TO MAKE YOUR WAY TOWARDS THE BELL TOWER, AS THIS IS SOMETHING YOU GUYS WON’T WANT TO MISS! DON’T WORRY, MY LITTLE PETS WON’T BITE ANYMORE~ I PROMISE.”

Curtis and I gave a quick glance and nod at each other. “Get on, quick!” From atop his world lion, Grawder, Curtis beckoned with his left arm stretched out.

Grawder let out a dissatisfied grunt, but otherwise kept to himself as I hopped onto his back behind Curtis, and we immediately headed towards the bell tower. In hope of easing some of my injuries, I used this time to circulate mana towards the deeper wounds.

As we got closer to the bell tower, I could see flashes of spells going off in the vicinity. “What do you think is going on?” Curtis asked. I couldn’t see his face, but from just his voice I could imagine the sort of anxious expression he had on his frustratingly handsome face.

“Some of the students and professors are firing spells at the bell tower,” I commented with the obvious, not knowing what else to say.

“It looks like there’s some sort of barrier surrounding the bell tower,” Curtis pointed out as a translucent wall flickered after receiving a spell cast by a professor.

It wasn’t long until we came into full view of what was happening for the ‘main event.’ There was a large stone platform that hadn’t been there before, most likely erected by magic. The once flawless marble floor around the bell tower, which marked the center of the academy, was cracked and splintered with pools of wet crimson blood. Various species of discolored mana beasts had gathered around the platform, waiting patiently, almost robotically, ignoring the frightened students just outside the barrier.

[Earthen Javelin Barrage]

[Supernova]

[Thunder Spear]

[Windblade Twister]

After a jumbled drone of chanting, several high-leveled spells were cast in the direction of the bell tower, but despite the huge manifestations of elements bombarded onto a single point, the mana shield that closed off the bell tower only fizzed harmlessly before eating up all of the spells. Seeing that leaves of the trees on the inside of the barrier had not the slightest rustle proved how impenetrable this barrier was.

There was a large crowd of both students and faculty members in front of the bell tower, who were both injured and scared, unsure of what to do as the professors made fruitless attempts at breaking through the protective field.

“Stay here while I try to find the rest of the DC members,” Curtis instructed before dropping me off near the front of the barrier. Before I could say anything, Grawder raced off with his master riding on his back, leaving me anxiously waiting for something to happen.

The crowd of dishevelled students were all anxiously chatting with their friends and peers about the disaster that fell upon them today. Some were crying, while other red-eyed students had already passed that phase and were waiting with hardened expressions. I could only wait as well. With the cage keeping us from leaving the academy grounds and mana beasts that seemed ready to jump and devour any who disobeyed, I could see the hope in their eyes flickering away. We were prisoners of this massacre, awaiting our sentence.

Although most of the students in the crowd seemed only lightly injured and battered—indicating that they’d caved in rather quickly—there were a few fighters whose injuries were more serious. Fortunately, some of the professors were adept in the field of healing. While they couldn’t compare to Emitters, they were able to save a few lives today.

“WELL IT SEEMS THAT EVERYONE ALIVE HAS MADE IT TO THE GRAND FINALE OF TODAY’S SHOW! I THANK YOU ALL FOR COMING!” The high-pitched tenor had a piercing quality that made everyone turn their attention back towards the bell tower.

He appeared... as if manifesting out of the shadows. The source of the jarring voice that sounded like rusted nails scraping against a chalkboard. He wore a gaudy red robe, decorated with an unreasonable amount of jewelry, reminding me of some second son of a king—a figure who was so down the line of power that his only defining aspect was his inherited wealth. The man wore a rather creepy mask that didn’t match his attire. It was a simple white mask with two slits for his eyes, and a crudely drawn jagged smile the color of blood. Behind his mask was a head of crimson hair that flowed past his shoulder blades.

While he had his hands behind his back, it looked like he was holding something, but I couldn’t make out what it was because of his shadow.

At the sight of the bold figure, the murmuring of everyone ceased, creating a rather eerie atmosphere. A deafening silence descended upon the crowd as all eyes fell on the mysterious masked man, depicting both curiosity and fear of what he would do next.

Drip. Drip. Drip. The sound of small droplets splashing on the ground echoed through the entire space, further adding to the uneasy suspense.

All of a sudden, an earthen spear barrelled directly at the masked culprit. Unfortunately, its trajectory ended as it smashed into the protective shield, shattering into pieces.

Unfazed, he stood there as students began chanting in desperate hopes that somehow, the barrier had weakened enough for us to break through.

Strings of curses were shouted out at the masked figure as everyone realized that it was impossible to break through. I heard familiar voices cry out insults and profanities as they didn't know what else to do at this point.

"Pfft..." The man's shoulders bobbed up and down as he tried to contain his laughter.

"PUAHAAAAAAAAHA!" His manic laughter, unaided by mana, echoed throughout the area, somehow drowning out everyone else's voices.

I could see a mixture of emotions in the students' and professors' faces: fear, anger, desperation, confusion, frustration, and helplessness as they were all stunned into silence by the abrupt laughter.

It was then that the masked man tossed the object he was holding behind his back onto the floor.

With a dull thud, the spherical object rolled into view close enough for the people in the front to see.

It was a hea...

It was a real head.

It wasn't the sound of water dripping that I heard, it was blood from the head.

It took my mind a couple of seconds of blank staring to process what was going on before a wave of nausea hit me like a bat.

I threw up.

Over and over again.

The stench of last night's dinner mixed with an acidic twist made me gag more until I was left with only dry heaves and watery eyes.

By the time I composed myself, I could see students and professors alike either looking away, pale-faced, or clutching their stomachs as they continued vomiting on the ground.

I didn't want to look again, but my eyes were itching to look back at the decapitated head. When I saw it again, I noticed it was a dwarf's. I'd seen her before, but hair covered some of her face as a pool of blood expanded from underneath with only the bone of her spine jutting out...it was so white.

I was drawn to the gore. My mind was screaming to turn away, but my eyes stayed fixated on the gruesome sight as everything else blurred out of focus.

As his disturbing laughter continued, his whole body shaking in delight, a booming howl caught everyone's attention.

“NOOOOOOO! DORADREA!” I spotted Theodore as he roared, charging furiously towards the masked man. He knocked aside the students that weren’t quick enough to get out of his one-man stampede.

“DORADREA!” Theodore screamed, his voice cracking as he hammered his fists against the translucent barrier.

There were only two sounds that could be heard. It was the sound of delighted laughter coming from the masked man, and the sound of Theodore’s thunderous pounding against the barrier.

BOOM!

It was one of the Disciplinary Committee members...

BOOM!

The same group Arthur was in...

BOOM!

A crater formed underneath Theodore as the marble floor around him continued to crumble and cave under the pressure of his might. As he continued smashing against the barrier, blood began streaming down his arms as his hands were shattered by his own strength. Despite that, the fury never left Theodore’s eyes as his icy gaze never left the masked man.

“COME OUT HERE AND FIGHT ME, YOU COWARD!” Theodore howled, a deranged look shrouding his eyes.

Suddenly, the masked man stopped his laughter and removed his mask. His face was narrow and sharp, with skin that glowed in a hue of gray. In spite of the sharp and the attractive features he boasted, it was hard to miss the crazy, almost psychotic expression that seemed to have been permanently ingrained into his being. His face was wrinkled in a scowl as he tilted his head to the side, as if he was confused by Theodore’s last statement.

“Coward? Me?” The masked figure began walking towards Theodore with the easy arrogance of someone who knew that everything in the world existed for his taking, every one of his steps seeming to drive a nail into the minds of everyone present.

“Yes, you! Stop hiding behind this barrier and fight me!” He growled back, blood continuing to drip from his broken hands.

“Coward? Me? The mighty and reborn Draneeve... hiding?” The person called Draneeve blinked out of view and appeared in front of Theodore with a speed so fast, Theodore wasn’t even able to react as Draneeve pulled him to the other side of the barrier. He threw the Disciplinary Committee member easily onto the erected platform.

Caught off guard, Theodore landed less than elegantly on his back before squirming to his knees, having trouble putting weight on his crippled hands.

Again, Draneeve blinked in a sudden flash of speed and squatted down to face Theodore. “Why don’t you fight me now?” A sinister smirk curved on the red-haired man’s face.

With a desperate yell, Theodore jumped up, bringing his leg down, executing a heel kick towards Draneeve's shoulder.

BOOM!

As the platform splintered and a cloud of dust formed, it was obvious that Theodore had imbued enough mana into his leg to crumble a building.

There were a few cheers from the students as we all waited for the cloud to clear. I too hoped that the attack was enough to warrant cheering, but I knew it wouldn't be that easy.

A howl of pain amidst the cloud of debris rendered the cheers moot as we waited with bated breath. As the dust cleared, none of us were prepared for what we saw.

It wasn't a secret to everyone here that Theodore was a deviant, capable of using mana to manipulate gravity. Just from the fact that the stone platform shattered like glass, we knew that Theodore hadn't held back during his attack just then, but what we did not expect was for Theodore's leg to still be positioned atop Draneeve's shoulder where it landed... except... Draneeve was fine. Theodore's leg, however, had been snapped cleanly in half.

We all stood there with our mouths agape. Even the professors were baffled by the clear difference in strength between the two. Theodore's strength would've even made the professors do everything that they could to dodge the attack, yet this mysterious man here had taken it head on and come out unscathed despite the freshly made fissures.

"Come on! The Great Draneeve isn't hiding. Let's fight!" The smirk never left his face as he kicked Theodore away like rag doll.

"I'm fighting you like you wanted, right? What's wrong?" Draneeve tilted his head again in mock confusion as he continued to beat Theodore into a stupor. His face was no longer even recognizable as he was pummeled to a b\*\*\*\*y and broken mess. The rest of us couldn't even do anything... only watch as our fellow schoolmate was tortured right in front of our eyes.

"...cker," Theodore managed to croak before vomiting out blood.

"Hmm? What was that?" Draneeve landed another solid kick to his side, a loud crack of a broken bone accompanying it.

Lifting his battered head, Theodore looked straight up into his assailant's eyes with a look of pure hatred and disdain before he spat the blood congealed in his mouth at Draneeve's foot.

I could see veins popping on Draneeve's forehead but he simply took a deep breath as he ran his fingers through his red hair, peering down in disdain at the b\*\*\*\*y mess that was Theodore like a squashed insect.

"I see you still have a bit of fight left in you! Hmm... it is too bad though, you seem to be on the verge of dying from blood loss. Let me help you with that."

"GAAAAAAHHHH!" The gurgled scream was all I could hear as Theodore combusted into crimson flames at the snap of Draneeve's fingers. That was all he did... snap his fingers.

He snapped them again, extinguishing the flames, leaving a charred and smoking carcass.

I realized by this time that my hands were covered in warm crimson from my nails digging into the flesh of my palms. I was useless at this point. Even if I ended up succeeding in breaking the barrier, wouldn't I just end up like Theodore?

"Pfft! See! I helped him! He's not bleeding anymore, right? PUAHAHAHAHA!" His cackling laugh filled the area as he began clapping for himself in amusement.

Seeing that none of us laughed along, he just shook his head. "Oh poo~ you guys are no fun. Relax, I left him alive for now."

I peeled my eyes away from Theodore's decimated body to see Curtis being held back by the other members of the Disciplinary Committee. His mouth was covered by Claire who had a trail of tears streaming down her anguished face. The princess, Kathryn, was holding onto her brother's arm with her head down so I couldn't see her expression. I couldn't see that elf, Feyrith, and the other member, the mysterious one with the narrow eyes. I think his name was Kai...

"NOW! I apologize to you all for the delay! Without further ado, we will now commence with our main event! Fellas, bring them out!"

As Draneve grandly waved his arm like some conductor, the frozen mana beasts stirred and sat up straight as a line of hooded figures, covered in robes, came out from the bell tower, each dragging with them a student.

It was when I saw her that my mind came to a stop.

I felt like I was suddenly swimming in thick syrup as my hand pressed hard against the barrier. I fell to my knees and just stared out in front of me, in a daze.

Being dragged by her hair, her face battered and bruised while her clothes torn and messy... was Tessia.

The Beginning After The End – Chapter 93: Chosen Ones

CLAIRE BLADEHEART'S POV:

I held onto Curtis, clasping my hand over his mouth in desperation. My vision blurred as tears continued to well up and stream down my cheeks.

We couldn't... I couldn't do anything.

The disciplinary committee members were in charge of preserving the safety and order within Xyrus Academy. I was handpicked by Director Goodsky herself to take on this vital duty, and with the exception of Arthur, I was assigned the task of choosing the members and leading them.

I was their leader, yet I had let all of this happen... I let in a spy.

I was ignorant of the fact that all of our movements were being leaked to the enemy.

I was responsible for the state Theodore was in right now. Even if he made it out of this alive, he would never be able to walk on his own two feet again.

I was responsible for Feyrith getting captured.

I was responsible for the death of Doradrea Oreguard.

...

I should've noticed by how the radical group seemed to know of our every move and effortlessly slip past us on each occasion. I guess subconsciously, I believed that my team members would, without a doubt, be loyal.

Because of my naive assumptions, we were the first to get attacked. It had happened last night, when the soft, dim light of dawn peeked out over the horizon. We had been busy preparing for the full-scale battle that would come eventually, finalizing the emergency evacuation plan after constructing makeshift safe houses out of basements and old classrooms for students to barricade themselves in.

We had all agreed that this might be going a bit overboard, but I now realized that it wasn't even close to enough.

Restless, everyone had decided to let out some steam by training. It was Kai's idea. He suggested that we enlarge the area of the training barrier so that everyone could practice without the students, who were all on edge from the recent events, being startled by the sounds of spells and weapons colliding.

We had never enlarged the training barrier before, but nevertheless, I didn't find anything wrong with his suggestion, so I let Kai supervise the barrier while the rest of us trained inside it.

When the barrier formed, it took on a reddish sheen that normally never appeared. Thinking back, the training barrier Kai erected by using the artifact was a miniature version of the cage that was now surrounding the entire academy.

That's when we were attacked. Kai had let them in; it was as simple as that. That sly b\*\*\*\*\*d was the one who gave away all of our plans to the radical group while feeding us false information.

Kai had his hands full keeping the barrier up so that no one outside could hear the sounds of battle. We were outnumbered three to one yet we were on the verge of winning. The radical group mages were strong, but my team members were stronger. We would have broken free and warned the school... but he had to show up.

As soon as he stepped into the barrier, whatever advantage we had had disappeared. I just couldn't believe he'd been a part of this—no, I'm lying. It was definitely possible for him to be a part of this. What I couldn't believe was that it was actually him.

He single-handedly turned the tides. He was a gifted mage before and if it wasn't for his twisted and conceited personality, I would've definitely wanted him to join the Disciplinary Committee. He was talented, but a lot of his breakthroughs came from the overuse of elixirs and other synthetic drugs that would result in dire consequences later. This was the rumor, anyways.

But he was on another level. The mana fluctuation around him was comparable to that of professors'—no, beyond them. It was odd though. The abundant mana surrounding him was erratic, chaotic almost;

there was so much mana being forcibly generated that it overflowed. I wasn't sure if that was the cause, but even the color of his skin and hair took on a different tint.

The amount of mana was unnatural for someone barely hitting the age that most humans would begin to awaken. This reminded me of Arthur; he might even be stronger than him presently, however, I knew for certain that whatever led him to this state wasn't anything natural.

Needless to say, we weren't much of a match for him. Chantless casting, multicasting, an endless well of mana—even if he was alone, I felt like he could've held up against all of us together.

How was it possible for him to have become this strong? was the persistent thought that kept running through my mind, poking at me.

"You call yourself a student of this academy? Out of all people, I would've assumed your pride wouldn't allow you to be some dog of a crazy terrorist group, Lucas," I spat out in disdain. "I now see that I was wrong."

I could see that I had hit a nerve as his smug expression darkened, but before he got reckless like I had hoped, Kai intervened.

"Lucas, he wants this done quick and clean. Don't forget the mission," the narrow-eyed augments said curtly, his face tensed in concentration from trying to keep the barrier up.

Kai had ignored our repeated hateful shouts prying for the reason of his betrayal, only opening his mouth to keep Lucas in check.

At this point, it would be impossible to get out by trying to beat him; our goal was to create an opening in the barrier.

While battling, we intentionally aimed our spells at the same spot without them noticing, but the barrier was a lot stronger than we had anticipated.

After defeating three of them, Feyrith was the first to get captured and pulled away by the other radical group members, but by then, we had managed to make a crack on the surface of the barrier, a gap large enough for us to fit through. But not all of us were able to escape. Through gritted teeth, we had to leave behind Doradrea, along with Feyrith, who stalled the radical group long enough for us to escape.

It hadn't feel like we escaped, no—it felt like we were let go. I could still clearly remember the smirk etched onto Lucas' face as he stood there, looking down on me like an insect he released because he didn't want to trouble himself with the mess.

By the time we made it out, it was already too late. Our battle had taken time, and during that time, the academy was already locked in a cage and under attack by both the radical group and mana beasts.

Director Cynthia had not returned and by the time we found some of the Student Council members, they had been assaulted as well, although they seemed to be in a better shape than us. Clive seemed especially grateful that the Student Council President was still not back from her trip. The Student Council Secretary—Lilia, I believe—asked me worriedly if Arthur was okay, and was relieved to find out he wasn't inside the academy.



It was demoralizing for us as some of the students we tried so hard to fight for simply gave in and sided with the enemies.

But I couldn't blame them.

It was us that failed in our jobs to protect them.

...

"Please, Curtis... please." I continued begging, choking back a sob.

"Please, stop. You can't." I bit my lower lip.

"Please..."

Curtis' thrashing settled, but I could still feel him trembling with rage. I removed my hand from his mouth and noticed that there was blood; it was Curtis'.

He had been biting on his lips so hard, he'd bitten into them.

"I'll kill him..." I heard Curtis mutter, his voice shaking.

"Curtis, please... just wait. I can't have you charging out like Theodore. We can't lose you too." I tried to keep a firm tone as I spoke, but I didn't sound convincing even to myself.

"Wait? Are we supposed to just wait while we let him kill Theodore and Feyrith? Huh? Like how he killed Doradrea?" he spat out in a growl, his voice pitched low and quiet.

My chest contracted from the venom in Curtis' words, but before I could say anything else, a sharp sound stopped me.

Curtis held onto his left cheek, stunned.

Kathyl'n's eyes were red and swollen, her long lashes still wet with tears. Her expression was a knot of grief and frustration. Her usual impassive expression was nowhere to be seen. Her hand was still held up in front of her from where she had just slapped her brother.

The strike wasn't loud, nor was it that strong, but I could tell by Curtis' expression that the light slap from his sister struck deeper and harder than any bludgeon could.

"Brother. We need to think of a way save them. We need to make a plan to protect everyone here. We need to stop that monster, but we can't do any of that if you're like this... or if you're dead." Kathyl'n's gaze was unrelenting, her every word piercing through not just Curtis, but through me as well.

She was right, we needed to get our act together. We needed to think of a plan.

I looked around the crowd in front of the bell tower and behind us, thinking of a way to escape to Director Cynthia's room to see if there was anything that could help us in there, but robed figures stood guard while the mana beasts tensed up, ready to pounce onto anyone that tried to make a run for it.

It was then that they brought the captives out, and it was then, that I saw Feyrith being dragged out, beaten and unconscious.

As everyone stared solemnly while the row of robed figures, each holding onto their respective prisoner, silently trudged out, it took me a few seconds from this distance to realize that one of them... was the Student Council President.

ELIJAH KNIGHT'S POV:

The scene played out in slow motion for me.

I rubbed my eyes just to be sure, but no matter how many times I rubbed and blinked, her figure wouldn't change. While disheveled and matted with dirt and blood, there was no mistaking that distinct gunmetal hair.

My mind raced as a part of me wrestled to figure out what had happened and how she appeared here while another part of me was still in denial; She wasn't supposed to be here. She was supposed to be with Arthur.

Whispers and mutters began to explode as soon as the students and faculty members alike realized that one of the prisoners was the Student Council President and the other a member of the Disciplinary Committee.

"Shhhhh." Draneeve waved his hand theatrically for us to settle down before continuing. "I'm sure all of you are just dying to know what is going on, but before I explain, I'd like to introduce myself."

He took a few steps forward and straightened his robe, combing his hair back with his fingers. "As I mentioned earlier, I go by Draneeve."

He made a dramatic pause, as if expecting a round of applause. When nothing happened, he just shrugged and continued.

"I know that at this moment, you guys may see me as some sort of bad guy. I wouldn't be surprised, what with the attacks and the deaths, but I assure you, I am on your side."

That ridiculous statement caused an uproar, as jeers and shouts reverberated through the crowd.

"Silence."

His voice couldn't have been louder than a low growl, but the weight of that one word and the immediate pressure following it froze the crowd to a mute.

"As I was saying...My name is Draneeve and I have come to save you all." Draneeve spread his arms in a grandiose manner, his robe fluttering from the wind, making him look pretty impressive.

No one said a word, too afraid of what he might do; all of us simply waited for him to continue speaking.

"You see, I come from a faraway land. This faraway land is a cruel, cruel place for the weak. Yes, I am talking about all of you. Those gathered here are considered the 'elite,' whose backgrounds and potentials make you the future of this continent, but from where I come from, you guys. Are. Simply. Trash." Draneeve's last words were spat out in a mocking staccato.

“That being said, I have made this extremely long and tiresome journey to prepare those I deem worthy so that when my lord becomes this continent’s new ruler, you guys will have a place in his kingdom and not be tossed aside like the trash you currently are.”

I glanced back to see everyone just looking around, confused. By the expressions on some of their faces, they looked to be in disbelief. Not just surprised, but they sincerely looked like they thought this whole thing was some big prank.

“To those who stand in front of me today, congratulations on being the ones chosen to be honored pawns of the new ruler of this continent. Lukiyah, step forth and show them a glimpse of the newfound powers you have been bestowed.”

Lukiyah?

No... It couldn't be...

The figure that had been holding onto Tess by her hair stepped forth, dragging her with him. I bit my lip, struggling to keep calm. Underneath his hood, he seemed to be looking for someone before he stopped; I could feel his eyes on me. I stood transfixed as he removed the hood of his robe.

Confirming my suspicions, it turned out to be Lucas Wykes.

His eyes seemed to be laughing as he continued to stare at me.

Slowly, the edge of his lips curved up as he tugged Tessia up by her hair, just enough so her neck was next to his face.

His mocking gaze never left mine as Lucas ran his tongue slowly...gratingly up her neck to her ear, only to stop and wink at me.

Any sort of inhibition controlling my rage disappeared at that instant, leaving me with just enough sanity to curse out.

“LUCAS, YOU SON OF B\*\*\*H! HOW DARE YOU!” My vision reddened as my mind began to numb. Suddenly, as if some inner force pushed my consciousness out, my body felt like it wasn't mine anymore... like I was an entirely different person simply spectating my body from behind.

‘Kill.’ A voice echoed in my head.

I had never felt a sensation like this before, but I knew that whatever was controlling my body knew how to use my powers better than I could myself.

‘Kill.’

It was a peculiar feeling that I knew wasn't normal. It felt like the monster that I had been trying to keep locked up had switched places with me.

My vision distorted and constantly pulsed from what I assumed to be adrenaline. I couldn't hear anything besides the beating of my heart. My body seemed like a shell controlled like a puppet by someone that wasn't me.

‘Kill.’ The voice was getting stronger.

What the hell was happening to me?

Black spikes ruptured from the earth around me, hurting some of the students who couldn't move out of the way fast enough.

I felt the need to at least apologize but my body was fixated on Lucas.

'Kill, kill, kill!' My mind felt like it was going to split open from the pain.

I walked rather unsteadily towards the ingrate that couldn't be described with just profanity. As I approached the barrier, I worried whether or not my body would be able to break through, but it turned out to be an unnecessary concern. Some sort of black plasma suddenly engulfed my hand and as my body laid it against the barrier, the black plasma slowly began to dissolve the barrier as easily as fire melted butter.

I could make out the surprised expression on Lucas' face, but the expression on Draneeve's face was far more unexpected. His expression paled, twisting and contorting in a way that I could only make out to be fear. He held his hands out in a placating manner, as if trying to calm me down. At that moment, the dozens of mana beasts all sprung out to attack me, but it was futile. At the flick of my wrist, the black spikes shot from the ground, skewering the discolored mana beasts mid-jump.

Was this me? I had never seen magic like this before. It was unnatural, almost evil in a way. Like it was a power meant solely for killing and destroying.

My body ignored the dead mana beasts and slowly drew nearer towards Lucas, who had now lost his bemused expression, replaced by furrowed brows and a tinge of unease in his eyes. The other robed figures decisively released their grip from their prisoners and was about to collectively rush towards me, but for some reason, Draneeve stopped them. I couldn't hear what he was saying, but Draneeve seemed to be almost pleading as his hands constantly gestured in hopes to calm me down.

Suddenly, a sharp pain that seared into me like a burning blade made my body go rigid. I don't know how I knew this, but it felt like my body was reaching its limits.

No. Not yet. I knew I couldn't control my body, but at this point, I desperately wanted my body to at least to kill Lucas like it had planned to.

My body began staggering, each step seeming to slowly become more unsteady.

Almost...

My body put up its hand and a black spike shot out towards Lucas. The spike that looked to be at least an arm's length couldn't kill Lucas like I had hoped, but its speed was fast enough to the point where Lucas couldn't completely dodge the projectile.

Lucas tumbled back from the force of the blow and I could barely make out the black spike sticking out of his right shoulder.

Just one more...

My vision dimmed and my body stilled; I seemed to be losing consciousness. I looked once more at Draneeve, who looked more confused now, and before my consciousness completely faded into the darkness, I thought I saw him. I may have just been hallucinating, but I thought I saw my friend.

I thought I saw Arthur, but that may have just been my wishful thinking.

The Beginning After The End – Chapter 94: Arrival

CLAIRE BLADEHEART'S POV:

Humility. Loyalty. Resoluteness. Courage.

These were the words instilled in me even before I understood what they meant. These were the four qualities that were necessary in order to have a heart as sharp as a sword. This was the creed of the Bladeheart family.

Ignorant as I was as a child, I had truly believed that I would be able to follow this sacred doctrine my family was built upon... no matter what the circumstances.

How truly ignorant I was.

This was the thought that clawed at my mind, making my heart ache as I stood helplessly, watching... simply watching.

Simply watching as Theodore was beaten and burned into an unrecognizable state.

Simply watching as Elijah fearlessly tried to defy, despite being unaided, a figure so powerful I could only submit and hope... hope that I'd somehow make it out alive.

Even with my eyes fixed on the scene, I had trouble registering what exactly was occurring, much less believing it to be real.

What all of the student mages here could not hope to do, what all of the professors here failed to accomplish—Elijah, single-handedly, had achieved.

I had never deemed him as anything more than Arthur's silly friend. He had given me the impression of being easy-going, almost ditzy at times, but not at this moment. After he had cursed aloud at Lucas, his demeanor shifted into someone unrecognizable.

As thoughtless and downright mad as he may have been, that ditzy friend displayed what I couldn't.

As if Elijah's enraged cry had released his soul, Elijah's body seemed almost lifeless as his shoulders slumped and his head hunched forward. I couldn't help but look away when suddenly a blast of black metallic spikes shot out of the ground. I thought Arthur's friend had already died, but I realized it wasn't Draneeve or any of his henchmen that invoked the mysterious spell; it was Elijah that casted it.

The spell he had used then was unusual, almost unnatural, but it was when he placed his palm on the surface of the barrier—when a black flame magic began coiling around his hand, melting the transparent barrier like it was butter—that a cold chill ran down my spine.

Seeing that mysterious magic destroy something so easily when not even the professors combined could scratch it, I felt hope. Maybe he would be able to end this. It was also then, alongside this feeling of hope, I felt an almost tangible contempt for myself.

I looked down to realize my hand had unconsciously gripped the hilt of my sword. I couldn't help but scoff at myself. What use was this sword of mine if fear rendered me unable to even take a step forward?

Looking back up, I fixed my eyes on Elijah. He swayed as he walked, almost staggering like he wasn't really in control of himself. Anyone that tried and opposed him was almost instantly pierced by a black spike. The speed at which each spell was casted shouldn't have been possible. They couldn't even be called spells, but more of an automatic defense mechanism.

I had never heard of something like this before, much less seen it with my own eyes—magic that was so unnatural... sinister... evil.

What confused me, and probably everyone else present, was how Draneeve behaved towards Elijah. Elijah was killing his mana beasts left and right; he had already killed three of his robed underlings. He should've been angry—downright furious at him for opposing his plans, but instead he looked... afraid.

I was only able to make out parts of what Draneeve was saying to Elijah as he frankly ignored the mastermind of this disaster, making his way towards Lucas.

I heard him several times repeating how he didn't know...

I also thought I heard him refer to Elijah as 'sir'... no, that couldn't be right.

After his useless attempts at calming Elijah down, Draneeve started barking out orders to his robed lackeys, telling them to not lay a hand on Elijah. It was a strange sight as our fellow student was trying to kill his allies but the leader was ordering his allies not to fight back.

The other students were baffled at all of this, not quite sure what to make of it; some were voicing their doubts on whether he was actually on our side, perhaps suspecting that Elijah was actually in league with Draneeve. This was until he collapsed on the ground, his final attempt at killing Lucas ultimately unsuccessful.

While at first, we were too shocked by Elijah's sudden outrage and display of cryptic powers to move, some of the professors composed themselves enough to realize that the fracture in the barrier made by Elijah at least gave us a chance to fight back.

This thought had already crossed my mind. I knew that with all of the mana beasts either dead or badly injured and Draneeve partially occupied with Elijah's body, now was the perfect chance to retaliate.

I knew this, yet my feet stayed nailed to the ground beneath me. I knew this, yet I was still afraid...

"Students, clear a way!" An arcane professor led a small group of professors toward the hole in the barrier. The students absentmindedly shuffled out of the way. While many were too discouraged to want to join them on their crusade, the image of Doradrea's decollated head and Theodore's lifeless body burnt in their minds, some students still gathered the courage to try and join them.

Clive was one of them. I spotted him rushing towards the professors, his hands already wielding his bow and arrow but the professor in the back stopped him from going with them.

“Fools,” I whispered under my breath. It was still hopeless. Did the professors think that they could now somehow beat Draneeve? They should know better than us. Was it their sense of duty that was driving them to their deaths like this? Or was it their pride preventing them from being rational?

Was being courageous akin to dying a fool’s death? Was that what the Bladeheart creed wanted from me?

Kathlyn must’ve heard me. Her red eyes, still quivering, were looking at me, as if I had an answer.

But I didn’t. I knew my limits and I knew only a fraction of what my enemies were capable of and even that was enough to rob me of any confidence to unsheathe my sword.

Like from an overused story my mother would always read to me before sending me to bed, the professors marched towards the fracture in the barrier like heroes on an expedition to save the princess from the evil magician.

I could see the arcane professor, whose class I took last semester, in the lead. Behind him was the spell formations professor who taught underclassmen. There was one professor that I couldn’t recognize following a few steps behind with a crooked wooden staff. Then joined Professor Glory. She caught my eye and gave me a firm, solemn nod before taking out a second sword from her dimension ring.

The look she gave me then sent chills down my spine. It was a look that I had never actually seen before, but one that my instincts knew—it was the look of someone accepting her death.

The Bladeheart creed clawed its way up into my mind.

Humility. Loyalty. Resoluteness. Courage.

D\*\*n it.

Thinking of this caused a mixture of emotions within me: frustration, for lacking the resolve and loyalty a Bladeheart should display for her academy; shame, for lacking the courage to fight alongside them; and ignorance, for foolishly believing that I had what it took to be a leader of the Disciplinary Committee... to be a Bladeheart.

I shook my head in hopes to clear my dark thoughts.

Living through this would give me another chance to redeem myself, would it not? I couldn’t be courageous, loyal, resolute and humble if I was dead.

I turned my attention back to Draneeve, who had kneeled next to Elijah. It looked like he was checking for signs, making sure that Elijah was still alive, carefully, almost tenderly, like a royal attendant would for his king. Our professors, prized mages throughout the entire content, were promptly ignored as he barked out further orders to his robed subordinates to prepare something.

Finally, getting up as he carried Elijah’s limp body in his arms, Draneeve began walking towards the back of the stone platform where several robed men were fumbling with what looked like an oddly shaped anvil.

“Lukiyah. Change of plans. You will take care of the ones ignorantly approaching and dispose of these—” he glanced down at the students captured, his eyes stopping at our Student Council President, “—trash.”

“I will be heading back first. I expect you to follow us through the gate promptly after,” Draneeve continued, the pompous expression he once had nowhere to be seen.

“Why are you bringing that along with us?” Lucas started to say, but his voice ended in a gasp as his eyes bulged out. The arrogance on Lucas’ face left him in a second as he crumpled to his knees, sweat dripping down his face.

“You are but a mere tool. You will do as I say, no questions asked, and if you continue to display this sort of ignorance again, there will be consequences.” Draneeve’s voice was commanding and sharp, different from how it was when he first revealed himself.

Lucas’ face struggled to remain firm as he clawed at his heart until Draneeve kicked him, toppling him over on his side.

“Say it!” he growled.

Even from here, I could see Lucas’ jaw clenched angrily, but he convulsed and repeated through gritted teeth, “I... am... but... a... mere... tool.”

“It is ready, my Lord,” one of the robed mages near the anvil announced.

“Hmph.” Draneeve proceeded, leaving Lucas heaving, trying to compose himself before getting up.

We all watched as this happened. Even the professors, brave enough to march towards a mage so powerful that he played with a Disciplinary Committee member like he was a ragdoll, were stunned as he crumpled a mage to his knees with just a thought.

Professor Glory was the one to catch on that something was amiss. She pointed towards Draneeve, who was heading towards the anvil that was now glowing, crying out, “We can’t let him leave!”

The four professors rushed through the hole in the barrier when a pillar of fire, as thick as one of the support beams in the academy hall’s main entrance, shot up in front of them.

Lucas was still recovering, his face still lined with pain as he looked at the four professors. The desperate expression on his face was now gone, though, as he walked confidently towards the professors, conjuring another pillar of flame using his other hand.

By this time, it was already too late. Draneeve and a group of his robed lackeys were now gone, taking Elijah with them, leaving behind a glowing anvil-shaped object.

“Lucas! How dare a student of this academy be involved in such acts of terrorism?” Professor Glory roared as she imbued mana into both of her swords. The rest of the professors also held up their weapons, the arcane professor already muttering a spell.

A manic grin spread on his face as he started cackling, sounding more like a rabid animal than a man.

“How dare I? You think you guys are anywhere near the level I am now at? How dare you speak to me as



if you are my equal! You are merely bugs that need to be squashed!” As he spoke, the mana around him began swirling even faster, veins appearing on Lucas’ thin, gray arms.

Thus the fight began. The glimmer of hope, that I had now that Draneve disappeared, faded as I watched my professors get tossed around. The spells Lucas used weren’t special, but the amount of mana he exhibited and the control he had over them was truly terrifying. Simple and obvious implications of multicasting only allowed for each spell that was used in congruence with another to be harder to control and weaker in power.

Even casting two spells at once consisted of essentially splitting your consciousness to mold and manipulate the mana differently. Since Professor Glory focused more of her skills in her swordsmanship with mana augmentation, she could barely initiate three spells while some of the more well-versed professors could cast four spells at once.

Yet, Lucas was easily casting six spells. He was surrounded by a flaming sphere that shielded him from any of the professors’ magic as four offensive spells had already knocked out the spell formations professor. A two meter flaming knight was fighting on par with Professor Glory, keeping her, who stood as the vanguard, from protecting her teammates. It was cruel to watch as Lucas easily overwhelmed the combined efforts of four professors.

“What are we standing here for, we need to help them!” Curtis voice stirred me from my daze. His clear eyes, shaking with rage and impatience, peered deep into me.

He was right; it was my duty.

I was the leader of the Disciplinary Committee.

I shifted my gaze towards the bell tower. I saw Feyrith and Tessia along with the other students that were captured. I saw Theodore; he could still be alive. We could still save him if we acted now.

Lucas was occupied with the professors and only a few of the robed lackeys stayed behind. It was my duty. Yet, why couldn’t I still move? Was my body so deeply entangled in the vine of fear?

“Gah!” A pained cry made all of us turn our heads.

It was Professor Glory.

She was lying on the ground, grasping her side, as a puddle of blood slowly spread from underneath her.

I was reminded of how she looked at me before crossing the barrier. Her eyes told me she knew she could die, but it wasn’t a look of resignation, but one of determination. She was definitely afraid, but she was doing what she could in hopes to give the other students here a chance to live.

“You’re right.” I tore through the shackles that had bound me to my spot and took a step forward. Unsheathing my sword, I locked eyes with Curtis as he got on Grawder, and he gave me a firm nod, his eyes reflecting the same determination that Professor Glory had given me.

I looked for Clive and a few other students I knew who were capable enough to be of use before going through the barrier.

The robed lackeys that were keeping us from escaping had already gone through to aid Lucas, so I was able to spot Clive helping some of the professors lead the students away from the area.

Curtis and I, along with a friend from Professor Glory's class, stood as vanguard, with Kathyln and Clive riding on Grawder.

"D-don't!" I barely managed to hear Professor Glory croak, her eyes wide in fear, when we were attacked by the robed lackeys. They were somehow completely covered under their robes, with even their faces hidden by unnatural shadows. I had just blocked an earthen spike with my blade when another robed figure jumped up from behind me, knocking me down.

Rolling away, I lashed out my sword at the robed man, slicing him where his throat should be. I felt it too... the sensation of my blade on skin. Ye, the robed man neither stopped nor flinched, his gray hands reaching out for me, mana surrounding them.

Just then, Curtis' bond tackled the robed man from the side, knocking him away. "Are you okay, Claire?" Kathyln extended a hand to help me up after casting a spell to immobilize the enemy, when I heard a shrill howl from where the professors were fighting Lucas.

It was the arcane professor as he was being held up by his neck by the flame guardian Lucas conjured. His neck was steaming as the smell of burnt skin filled the air even all the way here.

As the arcane professor struggled to free himself, his screams were eventually reduced to throaty gasps as he desperately kicked and thrashed wildly at the fiery knight summoned by Lucas.

I would never forget the look on his face as his body fell limp. I tore my eyes away as the professor's body caught on fire, burning through his clothes and skin as he was cooked alive for everyone to see.

I had to push my desire to run away. Was my choice wrong? I knew that professor. I still remembered the time he showed me a picture he had taken with his three-year-old daughter. I had told him it was a waste of money since getting a portrait would've been much cheaper, but he just grinned stupidly, cradling the picture like it was really his child.

What would happen to his family now?

I felt the dire urge to vomit but I was barely able to hold firm. Still, I was dazed enough to almost get hit squarely in the chest by a flame ball shot from another robed man. Barely managing to parry the spell and kicking him away while landing, I used this chance to survey the situation.

It was chaos as the professors that weren't fighting against Lucas were trying their best in leading the remaining students away from this area. Around me, I saw Curtis with Kathyln riding on top of Grawder.

Over by the bell tower, I spotted Clive, who had just picked up Tessia from the ground, being knocked away by one of the injured mana beasts. The other few students that I'd brought along with me from Professor Glory's class were doing their best against the remaining five robed mages.

To my right were the remaining three professors, and about a dozen meters away was Lucas, fighting them. Among them, Professor Glory was badly injured, her b\*\*\*\*y right hand pressed against where her right kidney should be with her free hand barely able to hold onto her sword.

Gritting my teeth, I ran towards Clive. I knew what Professor Glory would have wanted me to do. I had to save the students while they were keeping Lucas busy.

Gathering mana into my blade, I picked up speed, muttering a chant.

[Burning Lance]

Spearing the discolored grizzly wolf that had Clive pinned down, I helped him back up when a strong force lurched me off of the ground.

Clive's sharp eyes widened and his lips mouthed my name, but strangely, I couldn't hear a sound.

It wasn't just him; I couldn't hear any sounds.

And that's when I saw a stone spike protrude out of my stomach.

Dropping my sword, I looked down and touched it. There was blood.

My blood.

Suddenly, sounds came back in a barrage, shouts and screams filling my ears.

My eyes glanced back and forth between my b\*\*\*\*y hands and the spike coming out of my stomach. I wanted to turn my body around to see what had happened, but I realized my feet were dangling in the air.

Looking down, I could see the giant spike that had skewered me up off of the ground.

I saw Curtis push aside the stunned Clive as he made his way towards me.

"Claire!" I saw Curtis shout, but this time, it just sounded muffled, almost as if I was listening to him from a different room.

Scenes moved slower as I saw Kathryn jump off Grawder and dash towards me, both of her hands covering her mouth in shock.

Kathryn's voice was the same inaudible, muffled noise that only differed in pitch from Curtis' voice.

I tried to say something, but all that I could manage was a wet gurgle.

I thought of my father. His firm gaze. His eyes that drooped slightly from age. He had been the one who told me the importance the Bladeheart name represented. Would he be proud if he saw me now?

Just as I felt everything fading, I heard it—a blood-curdling roar piercing through the heavens.

It was a deep, rumbling thunder that shook the ground and the spike that was lodged through me with it. Even at the brink of death, I still somehow felt fear. It wasn't the sort of fear that kept me from moving like earlier, but one that made my body want to instinctively bow in reverence.

In this state of near death, I thought for a moment that I had somehow hallucinated this sound, but then, out of the corner of my eye, I saw it.

The unmistakable figure of a winged beast that every adventurer—every person—had once hoped to catch a glimpse of.

It was a dragon.

It was nothing remotely close to anything from the drawings my mother had showed me in books to scare me as a child. No, this dragon made those look cute in comparison.

With two horns protruding from each side of its sharp head and iridescent eyes that could freeze even a veteran adventurer, it was a manifestation of both sovereignty and ferocity. While most of the books I had read as a child described a dragon's scales as precious shiny jewels, this dragon's scales were such a rich, opaque black that it seemed to make its shadow look gray in comparison.

But as impressive and awe-inspiring as the dragon, that looked to be the size of a small house, was what made my heart truly tremble in fear: the boy below it.

It was the boy with the unmistakable auburn hair and familiar uniform. Each step he took, he walked with the most subtle, faint, yet solid confidence I had ever seen.

And seeping from his very pores was a rage so blatantly uncontained that I could only fear for whoever it was directed toward. The very air seemed to avoid his presence as the earth beneath him crumbled under his might.

All of a sudden, I couldn't help but let out a choked laugh at how foolish I was for comparing him to Lucas. As my senses dimmed, my only thought was relief that I wouldn't have to witness what he would do to those that crossed his path.

My only regret was not being able to see Lucas' expression of defeat in the end.

The Beginning After The End – Chapter 95: The Calm Before

LUCAS WYKES' POV:

Staring down at the professors struggling to stand back up—the very mages that I strove to become—it was clear to me that their lives were in my hands. With my newfound powers, these so-called “elites” were now nothing more than ants to me.

Enhanced cognitive processing capabilities for higher levels of spell casting.

A nearly unlimited pool of mana for me to access and utilize.

Heightened reflexes along with strengthened physical prowess and dexterity.

The elixir that Draneeve had given me really fulfilled its purpose. Just like he had promised, it truly brought forth my full potential.

It was obvious since early on that I was a gifted mage. However, being outshined by my older brother, Bairon, my accomplishments were never able to satisfy my family's expectations. I had lived my childhood chasing after his insurmountable shadow, but no longer; I felt like I had finally surpassed him.

Easily wiping out the distinguished professors of this academy, it felt like I had actually transcended the realm of mortals, incomparable to even the highest of human, elven, and dwarven mages.

... so why was I feeling this way?

This feeling of an icy claw gripping my innards, slowly twisting, slowly freezing my insides.

The palpable pressure in the air seemed to make the force of gravity in the vicinity stronger as he approached.

Beads of cold sweat began forming, drenching my clothes, as I unknowingly took a step back.

Was I afraid?

That was impossible.

With my newfound powers, I was invincible. I was all-powerful. I was perfect.

“Welcome to the party, Arthur. You’re just in time,” I jeered, satisfied with the calm timbre of my voice.

He said nothing as he continued his way toward me at a suspensefully slow pace.

My gaze shifted from Arthur to the obsidian dragon behind him. I had read in a book that the dragon race had already gone extinct from being hunted down. I would normally be more taken aback, but at this point, compared to the terrifying intensity emanating from Arthur, his dragon looked no more threatening than a common lizard.

His steps never faltered, never swayed, as he approached the bell tower. I couldn’t make out what sort of expression he had; his eyes were covered by his bangs.

The atmosphere was deathly silent, as even the senseless mana beasts that Draneeve controlled instinctively knew to prostrate in submission.

“Impressive pet. Did you think it could help you now? Look around you! All of this—it was done by me! The professors that were so highly regarded? I stepped on them like disease-ridden pests,” I chuckled, taking a few steps toward the boy I once regarded as my equal.

The dragon behind him let out a deafening roar that made the surrounding audience wince in fear, but I didn’t.

No. As much as I hated to admit, it wasn’t the dragon that gave me this feeling of unease; it was Arthur.

Unaffected by my taunts, he wordlessly made his way towards me.

Some of the students had already defeated Draneeve’s minions, only a few mana beasts remained on my side. However, they were petrified in fear; whether that was due to Arthur or the dragon, I would never know.

As he got closer, it dawned on me...

He wasn’t even looking at me. His gaze had never been directed at me!

My feet stayed glued to the ground, stunned, as he simply strode past, ignoring me and everyone else here.

How dare he!

I could easily crush him right now; he should be pleading, begging for me to spare him and his friends.

But instead, he had the audacity to treat me like air?

My clenched fists turned white.

Passing by everyone else he knew, disregarding his dying or dead peers and friends, Arthur kneeled down in front of the elf princess. His dragon craned its neck down towards her as well, and for that long breath of a moment, there was only silence.

Knowing exactly what to do, my lips curled up into a smirk. Let's see him ignore this.

"She was crying for you, you know," I taunted.

No reaction.

"Oh sure, she stayed strong at first. It made it all the more satisfying seeing her break down," I chuckled.

His shoulders twitched a bit.

His dragon looked back at me, its eyes piercing me with a ferocity that might've frightened me before.

"You see, I wanted to play with your little elf princess more, but Draneeve told me not to lay a hand on her. I was going to disagree at first but an idea struck me—what better way to break you than have you lay helplessly on the ground as you watch me cripple the girl you care for so much?" My laugh echoed throughout the academy as everyone else watched, unable to even muster up the courage to utter a word.

The dragon let out a grunt and looked like it was about to charge at me when it abruptly froze.

My face twitched in rage as Arthur continued to wordlessly cling onto his little elf lover. He still chose to ignore me?

"Arthur Leywin! You dare ignore me?" I roared. "You think you're so much better than me? Let's see you go easy on me now! I'll break every bone in your body so you can only cry helplessly as I desecrate Tessia right—"

My words got caught in my throat as the ground abruptly splintered and crumpled underneath Arthur like a sheet of paper, making me stumble.

I regained my balance and looked back up at Arthur, whose back was still facing me as he gently laid the elf princess back on the ground. All of a sudden, I was hit with the same sensation as earlier— the frigid, emotionless grip of a demon, twisting at my insides, wringing the air out of my lungs.

As if the wind had been knocked out of me, air escaped my throat as choppy and shallow gasps.

Unable to compose myself, I looked down at my hands to see that they were trembling.

I realised it wasn't just my hands but my whole body shuddered uncontrollably from the very core.

What was happening to my body? Why was I reacting this way towards some boy my age? It should be impossible for him to be stronger than me, yet... what was this sense of—

He turned around.

I would never have thought that something as simple as eye contact could be so terrifying until his pale blue eyes, sharp as a knife, met mine, and the remaining air in my lungs was sucked out.

And suddenly, I realized what I had been feeling the entire time, the word to describe the emotions I couldn't grasp...

No! I refuse to admit this!

I ignored the inaudible scream of protest deep in my mind that was begging me to flee, to escape in the opposite direction from him.

"Oh, am I finally worthy of your attention?" I spat out mockingly, struggling to keep my voice from shaking.

"Lucas." Arthur was a peasant who had such a banal background that his existence would normally amount to less than a retired mule, while I was born into the Wykes family, which birthed the most talented mages this continent had seen. Yet his voice rang with such glaring authority that it made me almost kneel on impulse.

"I thought of you as nothing more than a mere wasp I deemed unnecessary to kill," Arthur continued with a chill edge to his voice as he once again began walking towards me.

"But even the holiest of saints would swat it down, without hesitation, if said wasp so much as dared to sting him." His cold, emotionless eyes, empty and frozen, never broke contact with mine as a tangible bloodlust gripped at my limbs like shackles.

He was comparing me to a bug. No, he truly saw me as a bug. Yet any words of rebuttal or protest refused to leave my mouth.

Why...

It wasn't supposed to be like this. My powers should now be greater than his. So why was this happening? How could a boy a year younger frighten me more than Draneeve? How many legions of men and beasts did he have to murder in order to possess such suffocating, oppressive killing intent?

Even the very earth seemed heedful of Arthur as the ground sunk down with each step he took.

My heart pounded harder and harder against my ribcage as if it wanted to break out and escape. My vision blurred as cold beads of sweat rolled down from my forehead into my eyes.

Tearing my gaze away from Arthur, I focused on Tessia. The dragon had curled up protectively around the elf princess, leaving me no opening to make use of her.

Silently, as Arthur advanced closer, I saw it. In his eyes was a raging tempest, so hungry to create mayhem, just barely contained.

But I was Lucas Wykes, second-born of Otis Vayhur Wykes! Elite mages of Xyrus Academy had been brought to their knees by my overwhelming strength. Arthur was nothing but a lowly peasant—his only luck was being born with a decent talent for magic!

My mind snapped into a state of desperation and frenzy as I fought down the burning desire to run. Him, scare me? Never. I would rather die than plead for my life.

The Beginning After The End – Chapter 96: The Storm

ARTHUR LEYWIN'S POV:

Tessia was okay...

Bruises and scrapes were visible on her smooth, pale skin. Thankfully they were only surface wounds.

She was okay.

It seemed like she had been drugged with an anesthetic to keep her unconscious temporarily...

Yes, this was better. That way, she wouldn't have to be awake for all of this...

She wouldn't have to witness what I was about to do.

Sylvie, protect Tess. I'll be enough to handle him, I reassured my bond.

This was my fault. I was a fool for letting Lucas live this long. This world had made me soft.

My head continued to pound as I walked towards Lucas.

Nothing else mattered. Not now. Not until I took care of the pest.

"S-Stay back!" Lucas stammered, a crazed look visible in his eyes.

He prepared a spell as he retreated. I wonder if he'd realized that his spells were in fact eating away at his lifeforce. It didn't matter; I'd kill him before he did himself.

[Hell's Rain]

He released his spell, dozens of flaming orbs scattering and floating around, growing increasingly larger.

He continued to grin madly as his body visibly withered at the burden of the spell. The red flaming spheres turned blue as he further refined his magic.

It seemed as though he was planning on taking not just me, but half the school down with him.

'Papa...' Sylvie's worried voice echoed in my mind.

It's fine.

I could let him kill himself with his own spell right now, but he didn't deserve that; that would be too merciful a death for him. I needed him alive, at least until I got some answers.



I wanted to destroy him instantly, but the attack—the whole disaster—couldn't have been done by Lucas alone. Someone had to have forcibly overexerted his mana core— to the point where even if I didn't kill him now, he would probably die on his own.

Whatever it was he had taken made it possible for him to convert his life force into mana, thus draining him of his vitality. The odd discoloration of his skin and the mana beasts present were too much of a coincidence to not assume that it had something to do with the Vrtras.

“By the look on your face, it seems you don't know what's about to happen. Do you think you could come out of this alive?” Lucas hissed, drooling from the side of his mouth.

“Die!” he spat, releasing his spell.

The dozens of flaming blue orbs, each capable of burning down a building, shot towards me like cannonballs.

I let out a crisp breath and muttered, “Second Phase.”

[Dragon's Awakening]

My vision shifted into monochrome, the only colors I could register being the particles of mana.

[Absolute Zero]

The very air seemed to freeze as a curtain of white flame erupted around me before I was bombarded with Lucas' spell.

I didn't have much time left in my second phase before the recoil hit. I needed answers before that happened.

As the cloud of steam and debris began to clear, I could make out Lucas' figure, the deranged look on his face wiped clean, replaced by one of utter shock.

“H-How is that p-possible? N-No, it wasn't supposed to be like this. How are you suddenly able to use ice-attribute magic?” he babbled, as if he had just seen a ghost.

Unrelentless, Lucas began chanting another spell, which surprisingly, by the amount of mana gathered in his right hand, was more powerful than the one prior.

“CREATION FORM!”

[Infernal Lance]

It was a type of spell I'd never seen before. As mana congregated, it manifested into a flaming blue partisan spear. What amazed me was that the mana particles hadn't simply formed the shape of a spear, but instead seemed to have transmuted into an actual burning spear.

“I hope you survive this one too. That way, you can watch as I make your precious princess kiss my feet!” he jeered, launching the flaming spear.

[Black Thunder]

I shot out a condensed bolt of electricity with my right hand, while catching the shaft of Lucas' spear with my left.

My arm lurched back from the force as an audible hiss resounded from the cloud of steam that rose due to the mesh of fire and ice.

"Gahhh!" Lucas' shrill howl pierced through my ears. "My arm! It hurts! My arm!" he screamed.

I continued walking towards Lucas who was still pawing at the empty space where his left arm used to be.

"White Fire," I muttered, and my left hand ignited in a pearl-colored flame.

I was less than a foot away from Lucas as he continued to back away from me. "'Desecrate'? 'Kiss your feet'?" I recited through gritted teeth.

"This... this isn't fair! L-Lightning magic? You're a q-quadra-elemental..." Lucas' voice trailed off as he stared in disbelief, his lips trembling as he noticed my lightning-clad arm.

"Yes, I am."

Lucas' bloodcurdling scream tore through the air as I gripped his remaining arm. The flame surrounding my left hand began to spread, slowly freezing his arm down to the very molecules.

Tightening my grip, his arm shattered like glass as Lucas stared at the crumbling shards of what used to be his left arm.

"N-No... How dare you! I'm Lucas Wykes!" he spat out as he fell weakly on his behind, his legs pushing away from me.

Kicking him to his back, he gave me a venomous glare, any trace of sanity gone. Placing my foot on his right leg, I pinned him down.

He wasn't a human anymore. Not at this point.

[Downforce]

"GAHHHHH!"

Lucas spat out a mouthful of blood, his leg crumpled into a mess of crimson. Shattered bone fragments dotted the pool of red as it seeped through the cracks in the ground made by the increased gravitational force of my augmented foot.

Another bone splitting crunch echoed through the surrounding atmosphere before a shrill howl of pain promptly followed as I did the same to his other leg.

Just like how the Vritra had left Alea, limbless and slowly dying, inside the depths of a dungeon, it was only befitting to do the same to someone so vile.

Picking Lucas up by the scruff of his uniform, I slapped his face to get his attention. "Who was responsible for all of this?" I asked.

As his glossy eyes met mine, his expression deformed into a scowl before he spat blood at my face.

“You think you’ll get any sort of answers from me? Puahaha! I’ll tell you this, though! That incompetent fool you call your best friend—he’s gone! They took him away to who knows where! I’ll bet he’s dead already! Hahah—” I dropped him on the ground, “— Ugh!”

I had been so worried about Tessia that it hadn’t registered in my mind— the fact that Elijah had been caught up in all of this as well. I lifted my gaze as I scanned my surroundings for the first time since i had arrived. I could see the numerous students and professors peering at me with the unmistakable expression of fear. Yet, out of all of those faces, Elijah really was nowhere to be seen.

“Where did they take Elijah?!” I roared out, hoping someone—anyone—would answer.

“They went through there,” a hoarse voice spoke out— it was Clive. He pointed to an odd anvil-shaped contraption that had an abnormal amount of mana particles fluctuating in and around it.

“Who was it that took him?”

“A mage that called himself Draneeve,” Clive replied, picking himself up.

Was it a portal? Were my suspicions correct? Did the mastermind behind this really come from the continent of Alacrya?

“It doesn’t matter. He’s probably dead, anyways. And so will be the rest of you, when he comes back!” Lucas snickered as blood continued to leak from his two crippled legs.

Looking at Lucas, a talented mage raised with the notion that his worth only amounted to his strength, who was glaring at me with neither guilt nor remorse for his actions and betrayal, I couldn’t help but pity him. Almost.

Lucas could’ve truly tortured and crippled Tessia if I had arrived too late. His earlier words still rang in my mind, haunting me with images of what could’ve happened if I hadn’t made it in time.

I placed my foot between his mangled legs at the only extremity left on his body besides his head—the only place he could have any sort of attachment to.

“W-What are you doing?” His voice was tinged with a trace of fear.

I looked him dead in the eye and responded with what only seemed appropriate, “Taking measures to ensure your filth won’t spread to the next generation.”

His eyes widened at the impending realization as the stubs of his arms flailed. He opened his mouth to say something but...

“May your suffering last onto your next life,” I recited indifferently.

The Beginning After The End – Chapter 97: Outcome

ARTHUR LEYWIN’#8217;S POV:

The firm, mana-imbued stamp of my foot against Lucas’ pelvic region created a cacophony of snapping bones, squelching flesh, and splintering gravel, accompanied by a mind-numbingly shrill screech.

At this point, Lucas, an accomplice responsible for so much havoc and death—the one that drove me to this point—was now nothing more than a dying body. His mouth frothed, with only the whites of his eyes showing, as he continuously mumbled incoherently. I lifted my leg up from the blood-soaked pomace of the one that dared to harm those dear to me, and once again, I was glad that Tess was asleep for all of this.

The disaster that had befallen us was over. The perpetrator that had killed three professors and was responsible for the deaths of many more was now fatally wounded, slowly dying.

Yet no one rejoiced. There was still fear in everyone's eyes, except, when it was once directed toward Lucas, it was now directed toward me. In the midst of this silence was a palpable tension radiating from everyone present, student and staff.

It had been a long time since I received stares like these. I relished it then, priding myself in my domineering strength, but now, only a helpless sigh escaped my lips.

A searing pain spread throughout my body as I was forcibly reverted out of second phase. My hair shortened as my long, silvery-white hair changed back to its normal short, auburn shade. The runes that ran down my arms and back faded as my vision returned to normal, although strained.

The recoil hit me a lot less this time than when I went up against the elderwood guardian. Although I didn't pass out, I hadn't used my mana very efficiently. While trying to make a statement, I used gravity magic which strained me since, without the help of my beast will, I normally wouldn't be able to use it.

Still, I was barely able to keep my body from toppling over as I lifted my hand to deliver the final blow when a sudden piercing ring interrupted me, drawing my, and everyone else's, attention.

The red-tinted barrier that surrounded the school shattered from above. The broken fragments of the barrier fluttered down, reflecting the vibrancy of the Aurora Constellation that was almost in full bloom, in the night sky; the bloodstained academy instantly turned into a scene from a fairytale.

Descending amongst the shimmering rain of the broken barrier shards were three figures. Even before I could make out their identities, the terrifying pressure they radiated told me exactly who they were.

The Lances.

"...ther," a strained, gurgled gasp escaped from Lucas.

With my attention focused on the Lances, I didn't realize he had gained enough awareness to speak.

Looking down, I noticed Lucas' eyes fixed toward the Lances; he spoke again, this time more distinctly.

"B-Brother..."

Before I could even react to what he had said, a sudden surge of light struck me in the chest, barreling me straight into the bell tower with such force that I broke through the mana-enforced wall, buried underneath the rubble.

Vomiting up blood, and what felt like my intestines, I tried pulling myself out, but it felt as if my entire body was glued against the wall. Confused and disoriented, I tried to make out, with my blurred vision, the one who casted the spell.

It was one of the Lances. I wasn't able to make out much more than his indistinct figure through my unfocused eyes, but before he was able to fire another shot, I caught sight of Sylvie, unleashing a blast of fire at him.

'Sylvie, no. You can't fight them,' I called out to her, my voice sounding weak even in my head, but it was too late. He blocked the blast like it was a toy ball before one of the other Lances trapped Sylvie in a dome of ice.

Even though every bone in my body felt like it was getting sawed in half and my head felt as if it had been punctured repeatedly, I was able to make a bit more sense of what was happening.

From her modestly curved figure and long white hair, the Lance that had trapped Sylvie in the cage of ice was female, and from the looks of it, Sylvie wasn't able to break or melt it. Despite the position I was in, I couldn't help but feel relieved that she had only been caged. It sure as hell beat the other options that the Lance could've chosen.

Meanwhile, the Lance that had attacked me had kneeled down beside Lucas. He seemed to be fairly young—maybe in his late twenties—and looking closely at his face, from the high-bridged, straight nose up to his narrow eyes, there was a very distinct resemblance to Lucas.

The last, much older Lance didn't waste any time to gather and organize the remaining students and professors. He was already interviewing some of the students, nodding in response to their accounts and turning his head to look at me.

Whether it was because of how disoriented I was, or of how worried I was for Sylvie, It took me until now to piece it all together: Lucas had called out 'brother' to the Lance that attacked me...

Before I could even curse my own bad luck, the Lance I could only assume to be Lucas' brother stormed towards me as his body released a torrent of yellow lightning.

"Death is not enough for the you. To do something so atrocious to a Wykes, to my brother..." He didn't speak loudly. In fact, it almost sounded calm, yet his voice carried an alarming clarity that felt as if he had spoken directly into my ear. A storm of electricity trailed around him, dancing like restless cobras craving to be released as he made his way towards me.

I tried to move my body, but after a few desperate struggles, I realized I had been essentially crucified to the wall by what seemed like electromagnetism.

Despite the situation, I couldn't help but praise the amount of control he had over lightning. For him, there was no need to concentrate on manipulating mana into lightning like I had to. Lightning simply bent and danced to his will like it was another limb on his body. Turning my gaze towards Sylvie, who was still desperately trying to escape from the ice cage, and back to the lightning-clad Lance, I finally realized just what white core mages were capable of.

"Bairon, you are not to lay a hand on him," the older Lance ordered as he finished talking with one of the professors.

“Hah?” Bairon turned his head over his shoulder to look back. “That boy tormented and humiliated my brother before killing him, Olfred, and you’re saying that I am not to harm him? Do you wish to go against me as well?” The coils of lightning surrounding Bairon thickened, obliterating anything they touched.

“The boy was the one who saved everyone here from your brother. And since when did you grow enough hair on your b\*\*\*s to think that you could challenge me?” the man named Olfred spat back.

I used this chance to try and shift back into second phase, hoping I could gather enough strength to at least escape, but it was useless. My body wasn’t even able to gather mana at this point.

Turning my attention back to the two Lances, I could tell that Bairon was visibly confused. Still, whether it was because of his pride or his doubt, he chose to persist. “Do not test me, Olfred. I am in no mood to participate in your folly. My brother died in my arms; it is only just that I do what his killer did to him.” He whipped his head, glaring back at me with pure venom in his eyes.

Bairon began making his way towards me again when suddenly, two coal-black knights erected from the ground beside him, pinning him down.

“Olfred!” Bairon roared as he struggled in the grasps of the two knights that seemed unaffected by the lightning surrounding him.

Bairon suddenly unleashed a shockwave, knocking away the two stone knights before he charged towards Olfred, lightning manifested around his flattened hand, turning it into a crackling lance. Olfred had already turned his entire right arm into a gauntlet of hardened lava, but just as the two were about to exchange blows, the female Lance appeared between them.

“Enough.” Instantly, both Bairon and Olfred were trapped up to their necks in a coffin of ice. There was no gradual decrease in temperature of the air or water in the atmosphere to trigger the freezing process. The space around the two Lances simply froze, and despite the gauntlet of lava surrounding Olfred’s right arm, the ice didn’t even hiss or steam.

“Bairon, you are not the one to make this decision. It is up to the Council to determine what to do with the boy... and the dragon,” she said, not a tinge of emotion in her voice, to a degree at which Kathyln suddenly seemed like the protagonist in a soap opera in comparison. Even as she stared at my giant obsidian dragon, there was no emotion; she regarded her as something akin to a lamp post.

Assuming that the two had cooled down, the female Lance dissipated the coffin of ice, when Bairon suddenly whipped around and shot a bullet of lightning directly at me but was immediately blocked by an ice wall conjured with a swift motion of her hand. Fluidly, the female lance swung her arm towards Bairon’s neck as a thin sword of ice manifested in her hand, drawing a crisp arc as she slashed, just deep enough to draw blood. She kept her blade pressed against Bairon’s throat.

“Insubordination will not be tolerated,” she said tersely as ice slowly spread from the tip of her blade onto his neck.

By this time, I had already given up on escaping. If I had thought that me shifting into second phase gave me a chance at running away, I rescinded that statement as I watched the female Lance manhandle the other two with frightening speed.

Bairon eventually relented, not missing the chance to give me one more deathly glare.

I won't lie—I might've winked back at him.

After less than an hour, the Lances had gathered enough information from the witnesses to piece together what exactly had happened. This granted me the privilege of being graciously unmagnetized by Bairon and, instead, having my legs and arms shackled together in cuffs of ice. I found the chance, during that time, to tell her that the dragon was my bond, and, for the first time since seeing her, she had a change in expression: a slight raise of her left brow. She freed Sylvie from the cage as soon as she transformed back into her miniature fox form, chaining her to my shackles as well.

After leaving me, guarded by one of Olfred's summoned knights, Bairon and the female Lance worked to completely destroy the barrier as the older Lance gathered all of the students and professors with the help of his other ten summoned knights.

I couldn't help but admire the barrier that covered the school. It was very well-devised, seeing as it allowed access, but restricted everyone from going back out; moreover, the Lances had to break the barrier first, which meant that it most likely restricted who was allowed to enter.

Tess, as well as all of the other captives, were still unconscious during the whole ordeal. Eventually, after the two of them completely destroyed the barrier, a team of mages sent by the Adventurer's Guild and Mage's Guild hurriedly made their way to the scene, promptly healing all of those who needed immediate attention and taking away everyone who had been injured to a medical facility.

It was chaos; sobbing families of the students involved, people that looked like reporters furiously scribbling into their notebooks, and noisy bystanders all gathered around the front gate of the academy, hoping to get a better glimpse of what had happened.

Fortunately, the two guilds had taken precautionary measures to make sure no one came too close to the academy at some point. There were gates erected all around the campus to keep anyone from trespassing, with uniformed guards stationed every few meters or so.

Forced to stay behind until further instructions were given, I made sure to keep close to the female Lance so that Bairon had no way of launching another quick attack at me.

"ARTHUR!"

I whipped my head to find the source of the familiar voice. After a few moments of looking around, I found my family waving at me from behind the gates. Even from this distance, the look of concern was visibly etched onto the faces of my parents as my father even tried to jump over the gate, only to get held down by one of the guards.

I could tell my sister had been crying as she was clutching onto my mother's sleeve. Next to her was Vincent and Tabitha who, I assumed, were searching for their daughter.

"Am I allowed to talk to my family?" I asked the female Lance, my voice coming out a lot more feeble than I expected.

Bairon immediately replied, "After what you did to my brother, you think you have the right to make requests like—"

“Boy, I’ll take you to your family,” Olfred interrupted. I didn’t have the strength or the freedom in my limbs to properly walk, so Olfred’s summon had to carry me there. Being held over the shoulder like a sack of rice wasn’t exactly the way I wanted to appear in front of the crowds of people present, but I was in no position to say otherwise.

The summoned knight let me down surprisingly gently in front of my family. Olfred stood behind me, turning his back; whether he did that out of courtesy or out of caution that Bairon might shoot at us both from the back, I frankly didn’t need to know.

There was a tense moment of silence as they stared at me, unable find the right words. Taking a look at my body, I cursed under my breath. I had dried blood crusted around my mouth and clothes from when I had vomited blood, and both of my feet were dyed in a crimson red. My clothes were in tatters and I was as pale as I felt. All in all, I looked like a homeless vampire that had just feasted on someone and then proceeded to dance in their pool of blood.

“Hi, Mom. Hi, Dad. Hi, Ellie.” I tried to smile, but that seemed to make them even more worried.

“Arthur, my baby, a-are you okay?” My mother stretched her arm through the fence and I gripped her hand.

“Son, what happened in there?” my father asked, worry creasing into his furrowed brows.

“I’m fine, Mom. I’ve seen better days, but I’ll be okay with a bit of rest. And even I don’t know everything myself, Dad.” I shook my head, tightening my grip on my mother’s hand to reassure her.

I turned my gaze to Ellie, who was still looking at me with an expression that still seemed to be deciding whether to be angry, sad, or relieved.

“Why are you cuffed?” my father spoke again, his eyes on the transparent shackles that bound my feet and hands to each other.

I didn’t know how to respond. I didn’t want to simply tell them I had killed someone and was probably going to be under investigation. My father might understand, but I didn’t want to have to say it in front of Mother and Ellie.

As I was looking for the words to properly explain, I noticed the female Lance approaching with an open scroll in her hands.

I stood back up awkwardly due to the shackles binding my feet to face the female Lance.

Without making eye contact, she began reading aloud from the scroll. “Arthur Leywin, son of Reynolds and Alice Leywin. The Council has decreed that, due to your recent actions of excessive violence and the inconclusive circumstances involved, your mana core will be restrained, your title as a mage will be stripped, and you will be incarcerated until further judgment...”

The crinkled sound as she rolled up the communication scroll echoed through my mind, clearly audible despite the massive crowd gathered around me. She finally looked up to meet my gaze. “...effective immediately.”



ARTHUR LEYWIN'S POV:

"Arthur Leywin, son of Reynolds and Alice Leywin. The Council has decreed that, due to your recent actions of excessive violence and the inconclusive circumstances involved, your mana core will be restrained, your title as a mage will be stripped, and you will be incarcerated until further judgment."

"... Effective immediately."

Followed by those words from the female lance's mouth were three distinct reactions from the people around me. The first reaction was made by the curiously ignorant. They eyed me with looks of perplexion, studying my appearance as they tried to fit me with the edict that had been read aloud by the female lance:

Inconclusive circumstances.

Excessive violence.

I could feel their cautious skepticism as they silently tried to figure out how a boy, who was barely a teen, could cause the Council itself to issue the verdict instead of the city governor.

The second reaction was made by the ever-foolish faces of the all-accepting crowd. Those that blindly worshipped the Council as well as all forms of higher authority. They took the words written on the communication artifact as G.o.d's truth and looked at me with eyes of condemnation. Their whispers could even be heard from where I was standing as their eyes narrowed into a disdainful glare, believing that I was somehow responsible for everything that had happened inside the academy.

The third reaction was one that I had thought I would only receive from my family. No. To my surprise, the students and faculty that were involved in the incident—those that had the strength to still speak—all cried out in protest. Because my family was the closest, I could hear them the most clearly.

"Incarcer... Your Honour, there must be some sort of mistake," my mother voiced out from behind the fence.

"Yes, I'm sure that there is an explanation for all of this. My son would never... there must be an explanation for all of this," my father amended, knowing perfectly well what I was capable of.

There were other outcries of protest: some from students I recognized as well as from those who were simply stating the truth; all of which were ignored by the female lance.

"This makes no sense! How dare you punish the one who actually did some good. If it wasn't for Arthur, you lances wouldn't have had anyone left to save!" I turned my head towards the source of the voice. To my surprise, it was Kathlyn Glayder. She was marching in my direction with unbridled fury in her eyes; an expression I had neither seen nor expected from her.

"I will see to it that my mother and father will rescind this decree at once—"

"Your father and mother were the ones, along with King and Queen Greysunders, that had voted in favor of this judgment," the female lance promptly interrupted. While her words were respectful, her expression and tone could only be depicted as indifferent and rude.

Before Kathlyn could get any closer, her brother held her back. I couldn't hear what he had told her but the princess finally relented, her face still red and body shaking.

I knew that no matter how much I try to reason with the female lance, she wouldn't listen. Letting me go wasn't her decision to make.

"Can I speak to my family one last time before you take me?" I asked, my voice coming out more sullen than I had wished.

After receiving a terse nod from the female lance, I walk back to where my parents were leaning against the fence. For a few seconds, we just stared at each other, not knowing how to begin.

"Don't look so sad, guys. Things will be better after this misunderstanding gets cleared up." I let out a wide grin, hoping to mask my uncertainty. I had allies within the Council, but there were too many unknown factors at work here. I wasn't so worried for myself as I was for Sylvie. To have a dragon alive in our continent wasn't a matter that could be waved off.

My facade must've faltered when I was focusing on my thoughts; my parents' expressions changed as both of them gazed at me, wide-eyed and afraid.

"Y-you... you honestly have no idea if you'll be able to come back to us, do you?" I couldn't meet my mother's eyes as she stuttered, her voice dripping with worry; I, instead, focused on her hand, her fingers were deathly pale and her nails red from how hard she was clenching onto the iron fence.

"Brother... you're not going to anywhere, right? This is all a joke, right? Right?" Ellie's face was a pale shade of crimson and I could tell she was doing her best to keep from breaking into s\*\*s.

I kneeled down so I could be at eye-level with my sister. As I studied her childish face, I could hardly believe that she was already ten. One of my biggest regrets was not being able to be by her side as she grew up. I had met my sister for the first time when she was four, and even after that, I was only with her for weeks at a time. While looking at her, I could only hope that the next time I see her wouldn't be when she was a teen... or an adult.

I got back up, prying my gaze from Ellie whose face had been so tensed up that her lips were almost white. "I'll definitely return home." I turned back around just in time for my eyes to water without their notice.

The lance named Olfred conjured a stone knight beneath me, lifting me up as the female lance separated me from Sylvie, carrying her in an orb of conjured ice. Approaching us was Lance Bairon carrying the wrapped corpse of his deceased younger brother as his gaze continued to pierce through me with pure venom.

Like that, we departed. Bairon informed the others that he would be making a detour to his family's house to deliver Lucas' body for a proper funeral.

I wasn't sure if becoming a white core mage came with the ability to fly, but all three of the lances were capable of flying without the need to invoke any spells, including the conjured knight that was carrying me.

My eyes stayed fixed on Xyrus Academy as it grew increasingly smaller the farther we flew. The place itself didn't mean much to me, but my time at the school inside the floating City of Xyrus had been one as an ordinary student mage. I was considered gifted then, but I was still just a student. As the distance between me and the academy increased, I had the notion that I was leaving my life as an ordinary student behind.

We travelled wordlessly through the sky as all attempts to start a conversation had been shot down. As gentle as they were in how they treated me, to them, I was still a prisoner waiting to be judged.

'Papa, what's going to happen to us?' Sylvie voiced in my head.

'I'm... not sure, Sylv. Don't worry, though. We'll be okay,' I reassured. Even without her replying back, I could sense the emotions she was feeling: uncertainty, fear, confusion.

It was impossible to tell exactly how far we had travelled South, as all I could see below us was the Grand Mountains that divided the Continent of Dicathen in half.

"We should stop here for the night." The female lance descended into the mountains as Lance Olfred and the stone knight carrying me followed shortly after.

We landed in a small clearing on the edge of the Grand Mountains facing the Beast Glades. I was still chained together so I sat leaning against a tree, watching Olfred erect a campsite out of the earth.

"Hold still, Arthur Leywin." Without waiting for me to respond, the female lance clamped an artifact over my sternum. Instantly, I felt mana drain out of my core as the device sunk deeper into my skin.

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"Ugh. My magic won't help me escape from you guys, so why the sudden precaution?" I asked through gritted teeth. The sensation of your mana being forcibly contained wasn't a pleasant feeling.

"There are other ways you can make trouble," she replied tersely before taking the sleeping Sylvie and retreated into one of the stone huts that Olfred had conjured.

"How could I even..." I muttered under my breath, annoyed.

"It's because we're so close to the Beast Glades." I turned my head towards Olfred, who took a seat on the ground next to me as he let out a sigh.

"You guys are the Lances, though. Are you saying that there are mana beasts that even you guys aren't capable of beating?" I asked, a little taken aback by his approach.

"I haven't met one so far, but the Beast Glades hold many mysteries that even the Lances have to be wary of, especially at night, when the more powerful beasts roam. Despite our powers, boy, we're still humans, so we can still die. With all of the strange events coming happening these days, one can never be too careful." There was a brief silence that was only accompanied by the low howling winds.

"What am I doing, telling all of this to a little kid," he sighed.

I just shook my head. "Probably because you've been stuck with miserable company for the past few days."

I was surprised when the old lance erupted into a fit of laughter. "You're right about that, boy. Let me tell you, spending time with Varay and Barion together is more stress-inducing than any SS-class mana beast I've ever fought."

Varay. So that was the female lance's name.

"Let me ask you this, boy. I'm curious as to how you became such a capable mage at your young age."

"How do you know I'm capable? You've never seen me fight," I challenged.

"I've heard Bairon tell me about his younger brother, the one you killed. I'd also gathered stories from the students while helping some of them just now too," he answered, a curious look depicted on his aged face as he studied me.

We spent a bit more time talking to each other, but, while Olfred seemed amiable, he was also very guarded. I wasn't able to pry out any sort of information from him except those that I could find out on my own. He conversed professionally without revealing anything crucial, as did I. In spite of our little dance of social intricacy in the form of polite conversation, there was a subtle tension between us as he weaved my questions into jokes. We tiptoed around each other with our light words as we tried to, at least, procure hints to satisfy our curiosity. After an hour of fruitless effort on both sides, Olfred suggested I get some sleep.

As expected of the Lances; while Olfred wasn't as outright distant as the others, he was, in a way, more mysterious.

Olfred hadn't been so kind as to make me a stone hut as he did for himself and Varay. Without a shelter and the protection of mana, the sharp winds sent chills throughout my body, making myself as small as possible as I lay curled against the tree.

I must've fallen asleep at some point because I was rudely awakened as a stone knight picked me up like a sack of rice.

"Hi, best friend," I patted the conjured golem indifferently as I was whisked away back into the air.

'Sylv, how are you holding up?' I asked my bond.

'I'm okay, Papa. It feels a little stuffy in here though, but it's comfortable,' Sylv replied.

Her emotions were linked with mine so I was careful in making sure not to leak any of the worry that I was feeling to her by accident. I wasn't so much worried about what the Council would do to me; it was my Asura bond that I was worried about.

As we flew over the Beast Glades, I realized just how big our continent was. The diverse terrain of the mana beasts never ended. We passed through deserts, grasslands, snow-capped mountains and rocky canyons. It wasn't once or twice that I spotted a mana beast large enough to be seen clearly from where we were flying.

Olfred and Varay constantly released a surge of killing intent, warding off all of the mana beasts within our vicinity. Still, there were more than a few times where we took a detour while the two lances withdrew their auras.

I couldn't help but think that Varay had put the mana restriction artifact on me so that I don't purposely attract the attention of dangerous and territorial mana beasts. I had to commend her, as that was something I would probably do to get away. I was curious, though, whether I had the ability to survive this deep in the Beast Glades or not.

My internal debate didn't last long as Varay suddenly stopped. She took out the communication scroll that she had used to read the Council's sentencing before carefully looking around.

"We are here," she said.

I looked around in the sky but it was blatantly obvious that the only thing around us were the birds dumb enough to venture close to flying humans.

Just as I was about to speak my mind, Varay held up her hand as if she was searching for something in the air. With a soft click, the sky split apart to reveal a metal staircase.

Olfred let out a smirk upon seeing my gaping mouth.

"Welcome to the Council's floating castle."

The Beginning After The End – Chapter 99

My eyes stayed fixed on the iron staircase aged with dents and rust, until the roar of mana beasts below shook me from my daze.

"Looks like some of the more keen mana beasts have sensed the castle. We should hurry if we don't want any unnecessary trouble," Olfred voiced out to no one in particular.

Peering down from the sky, we could faintly make out the subtle movements of a few huge mana beasts that were shrouded in the dense cluster of trees.

"Mm," replied Varay, neither agreeing nor disagreeing but simply accepting his point.

The stone knight, that had me slung over its shoulder, gently lowered me onto the base of the flight of stairs before crumbling into sand and reconstructing itself into a cape as it fastened itself around Olfred's shoulder.

"We dwarves always carry a bit of dirt with us wherever we go," Olfred winked at me upon noticing my surprised expression.

The door closed behind us, and while I thought we would be surrounded by darkness, a moss-like substance covering the walls began glowing with a soft, blue light.

Varay dissipated the ice cuffs that shackled my legs together so I could walk on my own and took the lead while Olfred followed closely behind us. We must've trudged on for at least an hour up the seemingly endless flight of stairs when I voiced out my frustration.

"Is there no faster way to go up than climbing this absurd amount of stairs?" I sighed. My body might be stronger than most humans even without my mana core due to the assimilation process I had gone through, but I was still growing impatient at the wasted time.

“Magic cannot be used at all of the entrances,” Varay answered immediately, a hint of impatience in her already cold voice.

I let out another deep breath and trudged along silently. Stealing a glance at my bond, as expected, Sylvie was sleeping a lot more than usual due to her recent transformation to her draconic form. Windsom had explained to me about the different forms that Asuras could utilize depending on the situation, but I never knew how much of a toll it took on Sylvie to release her draconic form. It couldn't be helped, however, since Sylvie was basically a newborn in the eyes of deities who could live for what I can only imagine to be thousands of years, if not more.

Lost in my thoughts, I hadn't realized that Varay had stopped.

“Oof,” I let out a surprised grunt as I b.u.mped into her. The female lance was just a tad taller than me but I was a step below her so my face had only hit her back. However, my arms were cuffed in front of me and they had hit someplace a bit more... intimate.

I hadn't thought much of it, but to my surprise, Varay reacted in a way I would not have expected. She let out a rather effeminate little squeal as she jumped forward. Whipping around to face me, I could see her face flash in embarrassment and surprise before immediately contorting into a fearsome glare that could drench someone in cold sweat.

Collecting herself, she turned back around and placed her hand at the end of the stairwell before muttering softly, “We are here.”

Gazing behind me, Olfred just gave an amused smirk before shrugging his shoulders and nudging me forward.

A glaring light seeped through the crevice of the wall that had split apart. As my eyes adjusted, I could finally make out what was ahead. A brightly lit corridor with an arched ceiling stretched from where we were, walls covered with mysterious designs carved onto every visible facet and corner. The engraved runes made the corridor seem more like a memorial etched with names of the deceased than a luxurious decoration; each engraving and design seemed to hold a purpose and meaning. There were simple chandeliers hung from the ceiling every few meters apart, but while the hall was brightly lit, The white light gave off a cold, emotionless feel, reminding me of the hospitals back in my old world.

“Now that we're inside the actual castle itself, it is best not to converse with us or any of the lances,” he whispered with an unusual chill to his voice as we entered through the rather crudely-made door

We walked in silence, with only the echoes of our footsteps filling the hall. On either side were doors that didn't match the metallic corridor; there were doors of different colors and material, all quite distinct from one another. The corridor didn't seem to have an end, but luckily, Varay stopped us at a seemingly random door to our left along the way. She knocked on the door without pause until it swung inward, revealing an armored bear of a man.

I took a closer look at him.

“My Lords,” the guard immediately knelt down with his head bowed.

“Rise,” Varay replied coolly. The guard stood back up, but did not make eye contact with either of the two lances. Instead, his gaze was fixed on me as he regarded me both curiously and cautiously.

“Tell the Council of our arrival.” Olfred waved the guard away impatiently. The armored man took another quick bow and disappeared behind a hidden black door that looked to be a part of the wall.

After a few minutes, the guard came back out and fully opened the door for us, allowing us in. “Lance Zero and Lance Balrog have been given permission to meet the Council, along with the prisoner named Arthur Leywin.”

I looked at Olfred, raising a brow. As he walked past me, he muttered, “Bah. Code names,” as if embarrassed.

I couldn’t help but let out a wry smile before trailing behind the two lances. Whatever awaited ahead would most likely determine my future, but all I could think of was what the code names for all the other lances were.

As I passed the guard and stepped through the hidden door, I could immediately sense the change in the atmosphere. We were in a large circular room with a high-rise ceiling that seemed to be made entirely of glass. The room was simply decorated, with only a long, rectangular table at the very back. Six chairs, each seated with one of the members of the Council, were facing the three of us as they looked at me, every one of them with different expressions.

““Your Majesties.”” Olfred and Varay both bowed towards the Council as the former kings and queens rose from their seats. Not knowing what exactly the custom dictated in situations like this, I followed after the two lances and bowed as well.

“Ignorant! Do you think of yourself on the same level as the Lances? You should take a knee at the very least as a sign of respect,” a husky voice boomed. I looked up to see that it was the former dwarf king, Dawsid Greysunders.

He sported a bushy brown beard that spilled from his chin and covered his upper torso. He had a barrel of a chest covered by an adorned leather armor that seemed like it was restraining his muscles rather than protecting them. However, looking at his soft, uncalloused hand twiddling the gold wine flute, I had second thoughts as to whether those muscles were ever put to use, or if they were simply just for show.

I had a hard time controlling my face as it contorted into a look of annoyance, but before I could rebut back, I caught sight of Alduin Eralith, Tessia’s father and the former elf king. He gave me a quick shake of the head, with a worried expression on his face.

Clenching my jaw, I relented. “My apologies, Your Majesties. I am but a boy from the countryside, uneducated in the ways of proper manners,” I said through gritted teeth, taking a knee.

“Hmph.” He plopped back down on his seat, crossing his arms. Even as he sunk back into his chair, it was impossible to ignore the sturdy frame that the former dwarf king had. The veins on his arms stretched with every little movement. Paired with a great bristling beard and dark, heavy eyes, even as a dwarf, he looked much larger than he really was.

“Now, now. I’m sure the journey had been long and everyone’s eager to get started. Varay, uncuff Arthur.” Curtis’ father, Blaine Glayder was the one that had just spoken. The female lance dissipated the

frozen cuffs that bound my wrists but let the slumbering Sylvie inside the frozen orb, as I surveyed the rulers of this continent. It had been years since I last saw Blaine and Priscilla Glayder, but besides the few extra wrinkles, little had changed about them. I noticed that the former queen did look a bit fatigued, but her expression did not give that away at all.

It was the first time seeing the former dwarf queen but she was just as I had expected—manly. She had a defined, square jaw with sharp eyes and dark hair pulled straight back into a ponytail. Her broad shoulders strained the fabric of her simple, brown blouse as she stayed seated upright on her chair.

Alduin and Merial Eralith, however, seemed to have aged the most. While it had merely been days since I had last seen them, I wasn't surprised, since their only daughter had been the center of Draneeve's act of terrorism.

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The two lances that had escorted me here took a few steps back from me as I looked up at the Council.

Alduin Eralith spoke up with in a gentle tone, his expression coming off as almost guilty for bringing me here. "Arthur Leywin. Before we begin, I would like to thank you, not as a leader but as a father for saving my daughter—"

"And need I remind you that we are here as leaders of this d.a.m.ned continent, not fathers?" Dawsid interjected, pounding his fists on the table. "This boy mutilated one of his fellow schoolmates before killing him. Shall I read the description one of the scouts so kindly sent to us?"

Priscilla shook her head, trying to quell the situation.

"Dawsid, I hardly think it's necessary—"

"Both legs, crushed into mush past the mid-thigh. Left arm, dismember and cauterized past the elbow. Right arm, frozen and crushed. Genitals..." As the former dwarf king continued to read off of the scroll, even he seemed to have a hard time saying what was coming up next. "Genitals, along with the pelvic bone, crushed and—"

"I think that's enough, Dawsid," Alduin warned.

"It seems I've made my point. Yes, it's all convenient and everything that this boy happened to save the entire school, but it did not justify the torment he put his schoolmate through. To me, I can only see this as him using this whole fiasco as an excuse to get revenge on someone who he's clearly had enmity with since the past," Dawsid said coldly.

"You can't be saying that this boy's main motive for delving blindly into such a dangerous scene was just to seek revenge. And even if he did, what of it. You can't prove to anyone here what Arthur's motives were. He did what we couldn't do in times of need and that was potentially save every student inside Xyrus," Alduin barked back, his face turning more and more red.

"Yes, and that is why I'm not suggesting we kill the boy. We just need to merely cripple him as a mage." It was the former dwarf queen that spoke this time. The cold indifference in her voice seemed to even make her husband falter for a moment.



“What my wife, Glaudera said, is exactly my thoughts as well. This boy is too dangerous if left alone. Imagine if he and his pet dragon decides to make enemies out of us...”

My ears perked up at the mention of Sylvie.

“My G.o.d, do you hear yourself? You sound like a paranoid criminal. Blaine, Priscilla, what do you have to add to all of this?” Tessia’s mother, asked, shaking her head, disconcerted.

“Merial, my husband and I both agree with you on this, speaking as a parent,” Priscilla said evenly, her distant gaze switching back and forth from Sylvie and I. “But, it is best to consider the Greysunders’ view as well. What they say, they say with the entirety of the continent at stake.”

“So what, we cripple the boy and kill the dragon, all for the off chance that the boy might harbor ill feelings toward us and decide to get revenge?” Alduin nearly yelled as he stood up, facing the other leaders.

“Alduin, know your place! Don’t think you are on the same level as us just because you sit here. May I remind you of your inability to even take care of your own lances?” Dawsid growled menacingly as he pointed accusingly at the former elf king, “This continent is potentially at the brink of war and you were careless enough to lose one of our biggest trump cards!”

“Your Majesties. Was I brought here to simply hear my judgment or am I allowed to—”

“You will not speak until you are instructed to!” Dawsid roared, cutting me off. “I refuse to any claims this boy is trying to make. He could say that the G.o.d of Iron himself spoke to him and ordered him to do all of this but it does not change what he had done and what he will be able to do if left alone. The scouts are still in the middle of gathering accounts from the witnesses.”

“I see no point in me being here if I am not even allowed to speak and give my account on what happened and why it happened the way it did,” I did my best to control the volume and tone of my voice, but I could tell it was coming out a lot sharper than I had wanted it to.

“You’re right! There is no need for this prisoner to be here. Olfred, lock him up in one of the lower cells and keep him there until further orders. Also, lock his pet in a vault.” Glaudera Greysunders responded for her husband, waving her hand toward us.

“Dawsid, Glaudera, the Council is not for you to run and order as you see fit. Aya!” Alduin growled. Behind him, a figure masked in the shadows kneeled, awaiting a command.

“Stand down, elf! Remember that you only have one lance at your disposal.” There was heavy tension as the elf king and dwarf king locked eyes.

Alduin was the one to concede as he reluctantly sat back in his chair. For a brief moment as I was picked up by Olfred’s stone knight, our gazes met. I could see the unrelenting determination in his gaze as he gave me a firm nod. I bit my tongue and chose to stay silent.

It was obvious that the former dwarf king and queen were all for crippling me, while the Glayder’s remained neutral since much is still unknown. I was going to have to rely on Alduin and Merial if Sylvie and I were going to get home unscathed.

As the stone knight carried me through a different door and down a flight of stairs, I tried to talk to Olfred with little results.

Taking a look around, it seemed like your typical castle dungeon where prisoners of war and traitors were held. I was in just one of the many cells, but much of the area was covered by shadows that the light of the few burning torches couldn't reach.

"This will be your cell, Arthur. Your bond will be placed elsewhere." The summoned knight carrying me suddenly crumbled into dust upon reaching my dungeon chamber. I landed rather unimpressively on my knees and elbows as Olfred shut the metal cage.

"Ouch, he could've warned me," I muttered aloud, brushing the dust off of my knees.

"That voice. A-Arthur? Arthur Leywin?"

My head bolted up at the sound of the feeble, yet familiar sound.

"Director Goodsky?"

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"Director Goodsky?" I sputtered incredulously.

"Y-yes. Although, 'director' doesn't seem to be appropriate anymore seeing as how I was stripped of that t.i.tle. Who would've imagined I'd meet you in here, Arthur," she replied weakly, and by the audible pant in her speech, it seemed as if she had suffered considerably.

"Stripped of your t.i.tle? I don't understand. What is going on here? Why are you here, Director?" I leaned against the metal bars of my cage in hopes to hear her more clearly. From the source of her voice, I deduced that her cell was diagonally opposite my own, but because of the way the torchlights were set up, most of the cells were still in darkness.

"We will get to that later. Arthur, how did you end up being locked up? With your ability, I a.s.sumed you would be able to fend well enough for yourself or at least escape if necessary." There was a hint of despair in Cynthia's voice as she asked me.

"Tessia was held captive by Lucas and I had to use most of my mana to fight him. When two of the lances appeared, I didn't have enough strength to escape," I sighed.

"I...I apologize, I don't quite follow. The half-elf boy, Lucas?"

It was obvious that Director Goodsky wasn't aware at all of the recent happenings at her own academy, which I found unsurprising since she would've surely been there to help if she had known. I filled her in as detailed as I could in the quiet of the dungeon, only being able to a.s.sume that her silence was indication that she was fervently listening.

It was hard to tell whether the other cells had prisoners inside as well, but the information I was revealing wasn't exactly confidential so I caught Goodsky up until the events of what had just happened with the Council.

“Can you describe for me how exactly the boy, Lucas, seemed to you when you fought against him?” Goodsky asked.

“Apart from the massive increase in his mana manipulation capabilities, I noticed that his physical appearance was different as well. Let’s see, he had this sickly, gray skin tone as well as dark lines, which I assumed to be his veins, running down his face, neck and arms. His hair color had changed too; it wasn’t blond like I remembered it to be, but it was more of a dusty black and white color. The Wykes family had always been known to have a keen fondness of elixirs, no matter what the side effects may have been—”

“No elixir on this continent has the capabilities to enhance the user’s mana core that drastically Arthur. And, you weren’t able to catch a glimpse of what the leader of this whole disaster looked like?” Director Goodsky interrupted, her voice edged with frustration.

“Unfortunately, I didn’t arrive in time to see him. Why?”

“I just wanted to confirm some things, but I think I already have a basic understanding of the whole situation. I knew it was bound to happen, but not this soon. They’re moving forward with the plan much too quickly.” I could hear the director’s footsteps echoing as she paced inside her cell.

“What do you mean you knew it was bound to happen? Who are ‘they’? Director Goodsky, I’m beginning to have a nagging suspicion that I truly hope I could denounce as simply my lack of judgement...”

There was a brief pause from both of us where only the flickering snaps of the torches’ flames broke the still silence of the dungeon.

“I cannot say, Arthur. I am bound by forces beyond anything either one of us can hope to go against. I am truly sorry.”

“A binding? Huh, I see. How convenient. And is there a way to remove this binding?” I asked in response, sounding more sardonic than I had meant to.

“I have searched for decades on this matter, and all were futile,” Director Goodsky let out a deep breath, ignoring my tone.

“Then the reason you are locked up here is because...”

“From what you have told me and based on what I already know, it seems I have been made a scapegoat that the Council wishes to utilize as a convenient excuse for all that has happened recently.”

“Why would the Council need a scapegoat?”

“I cannot say the reason for this as well,” she replied. There was clear frustration in her tone, but not directed at me, but rather at herself. “Arthur, it is painful for me to continue talking about this. Even the very thought of mentioning what I know to someone activates the curse. We should both get some rest; heaven knows we’ll be needing it.”

Letting out a sigh, I stepped away from the metal gate and leaned my back against the rigid, stone wall of my cell. Even without the artifact binding my mana core, I was still unable to use any sort of magic here.

With nothing else to do, my mind began racing with different thoughts.

We were inside of a floating castle located above one of the deepest ends of the Beast Glades. Assuming that I could escape with Sylvie and Director Goodsky, would we even be able to make it out of the Beast Glades alive? Sylvie was out of the question since her recent transformation had left her in a state only slightly better than a hibernating bear. Goodsky was a silver core wind mage, which might be enough for us to fly back.

I backtracked my plan after realizing the three of us would still probably get wiped out. On our way here, the two lances had to constantly release a strong killing intent to ward off any beast. Even then, they were cautious enough to hide all of our presences at times. It would be near suicidal to think we can simply fly over the entire Beast Glades.

After what seemed like hours of deliberation, I could only click my tongue in frustration and roll over on the cold floor to try and get some sleep. It was impossible after all. It was becoming harder and harder to push down the sensation of hopelessness creeping up the more I continued to plan for our escape.

BLAINE GLAYDER'S POV:

"What the h.e.l.l was that, Glayder? I thought we had an agreement?" the former dwarf king barked out after slamming the door of my study.

"Yes. I am well aware what the agreement is. Rest assured, you will have my, and my wife's, vote, Dawsid. However, even you cannot make me spout out such irrational accusations at the boy who had just saved the entire future generation of this continent, including my children," I responded icily, pouring myself a glass of aged liquor.

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"And, I'm saying that there will be no future generation if you do not side with me! Arthur and his bond has to go. That was the agreement. They have to be brought back to Him if we're going to even have a future in this continent."

"I know what the stakes are, Dawsid. I do not need you badgering me every moment you feel insecure. What you and I are doing is betraying the entire population, you realize that, yes?" I hissed, staring at the dwarf who wasn't much taller than I was even when I was seated.

"It's not considered betraying if this continent was already bound for annihilation. Blaine, you and I both know what is going to happen to Dicathen, regardless of whether we try to save it or not. We have to look beyond that and try to salvage what's important to us," he consoled, his hands gestured in a placating manner.

"If that's what you tell yourself to sleep at night, go ahead. What we're doing is abandoning our people so that we can save our own asses," I scoffed, shaking my head.

“That is what I tell myself! What He promised isn’t a bad deal! Your family will all live and serve Him just like my family will.”

“And what of our people, Dawsid? What will He do with the citizens of Dicathen? If even the Kingdom of Sapin and Darv aren’t safe after we promised allegiance to Him, what will happen to the Kingdom of Elenoir?”

“Bah! The elves have always been too old-fashioned and righteous for their own good. That old geezer, Virion, would never allow Alduin to side with Him. It’s a shame too, but, unlike us, the elves won’t realize what being a leader truly means. Just imagine, Blaine, the technology, the riches that He and his people will bring to Dicathen! Immortality, unrivaled martial strength, and infinite wealth will no longer be just a fantasy for us, but be only a matter of time!”

“Mind your words. I am following Him because of my family. Do not lump me together with the likes of you, who is abandoning your own race for the sake of personal gain. Im sure you can imagine what He will most likely do once he arrives. What will become of the rest of the three races? Most likely either a genocide of some form, or if he’s smart, he’ll make them all his slaves.”

The former dwarf king was rendered speechless by my response; his mouth moved as if he was trying to refute my argument, but no audible words came out.

“Nevertheless, my wife’s love for our children seems to heavily outweigh that of the entire human kingdom, and my duty to preserve the Glayder blood will always triumph, so rest assured, we will side with you. Hopefully, my ancestors will forgive my actions as this will be the only way to save the Glayder line,” I sighed in defeat.

Dawsid lifted his hand up, about to pat my shoulder when I gave him a sharp look. Feigning a dry cough, he excused himself, leaving me to my own dark thoughts in the silence of my study. Staring blankly at the extravagantly decorated room, furnished with rare wood carved by master carpenters, embellished with rare gems and metals worth more than a small town, a sense of dread and guilt began surfacing in my stomach.

These luxuries meant nothing to me. All my life, what I wanted was to be the strongest mage to make my father and my ancestors proud. Yet, it was blatantly obvious that my talent as a mage was subpar compared to even countryside peasants. Only through spending an enormous amount of resources on mana strengthening elixirs and aids was I able to barely break into the red stage. Even towards my own wife and children, I caught myself harboring feelings of scathing envy.

I had always been ashamed by this but there was little else I could do. Even having control over the two lances did not help my feelings of inferiority, instead, it was a daily reminder for me that in order to properly rule over my own people, I needed to be guarded at all times because I wasn’t strong enough to fend for myself.

Was I truly making this decision for the safety of my family and myself, or, like Dawsid, hungered and yearned for power incomparable to other mages? Being at the pinnacle of where my people would fear and respect me solely because of my strength, and not due to the protection the lances I had in my control; was that what I truly wanted?

After an hour of contemplating, I realized in my inebriated state that no amount of alcohol could wash this miserable feeling away. I stumbled over my own feet and toppled onto the ground. Losing my grip on the gla.s.s I was holding onto as I fell, it shattered on the floor ahead of me; the shards embedded themselves into the arm I used to break my fall with. I could only curse in frustration at my own inability. How pathetic was I, stumbling and being cut by mere gla.s.s. Had I been born more talented, more powerful...

I picked myself up, ignoring the bloodstains on the ground, leaving the shards of gla.s.s in my bleeding arm while staggering to my bedroom. I could smell the stench of liquor in my breath as I let out a deep breath.

Memories of when I had first met the boy flashed in my mind as I trudged towards the door that now seemed so far away. Even before my children started speaking of Arthur from school, he had left a deep impression, enough for me to see him as a figure of great importance in the future. Perhaps the only thing greater than his strengths as a mage was his poor luck in being involved in this conspiracy.

"I'm sorry, boy..." I mumbled under my breath. "I would like to believe that it is for the good of this continent that you become a sacrifice." Even as I said this, the words sounded empty to my ears. I had hoped saying it aloud would provide some sort of self-a.s.surance, but what I felt for Arthur wasn't grief or sympathy.

Stronger than the feelings of a king sacrificing for the greater good...

Even stronger than the weight of a Glayder trying to keep his bloodline alive...

I felt this soothing sensation of my dark envy being resolved with the death of this boy. I loathed myself for this, but what of it? I am Blaine Glayder, fourth of his name, yet my talents as a mage don't even amount to a single drop compared to the ocean that is Arthur Leywin. Why should that boy of no origins carry a power that is better fit for me?

I unlocked the door and wobbled unsteadily, denying the maids rushing to help me.

"I'm sorry, boy," I mumbled again. "It is for the greater good..."

"For my greater good."