

## The Beginning After The End, Chapter 8: Questions

The blurred sight of a familiar setting made me blink a few times to reconfirm that what I was seeing wasn't a dream. From the looks of it, I seemed to be back in my old body. Getting up from the couch that I was sitting on, I left my room in the castle. A young maid, who had been waiting for me just outside, greeted me respectfully immediately on sight.

"G-good morning King Grey."

I didn't even bother glancing towards her direction, walking as she followed a couple meters away.

Reaching the courtyard where all of the trainees were lined up with swords held in front of them I turned my attention to the instructors yelling at them about proper stance and breathing. When one of them saws me, he immediately turned and gave a firm military salute, with the other instructors and trainees following suit.

I simply motioned for them to continue before continuing. Reaching my destination, I pushed open the double doors, arriving in front of an aged man with a head of thick white hair that matched his long beard, and emerald eyes that shined with a sense of cunning wisdom and knowledge. He was the head of The Council, Marlorn.

While I held the position of "King" I couldn't help but consider myself as just a glorified soldier. The one's who actually governed the country, managing the politics and economy, was The Council

So what was came of my position as King?

The title of King meant that I was actually more of a one-man army. Due to the decreasing numbers of children born and limited amount of resources, The Councils of each country assembled and, after countless months of discussion and arguments, came to the conclusion that if wars continued to exist, we would eventually wipe ourselves out.

Getting rid of war would lead to two major outcomes: decrease in the death count, leading to a population growth, and a decrease in destroyed harvestable land and resources from the result of nuclear arms. The solution that they came up with and enacted was to replace wars with a different form of combat.

What replaced wars became known as the Paragon Duels. Whenever there was a dispute on a level that impacted the state of the country, a Paragon Duel would be declared, with each country sending in a representative that they deemed was the strongest.

Looking up, Marlorn exclaimed with the standard fake, picturesque smile that seemed to be an inborn trait amongst politicians, "King Grey! What brings you to my humble dwelling?"

"I'm retiring."

Without even giving him the chance to react, I unclipped my badge, a piece of metal so sought after by every practitioner, and slammed it on his giant oakwood desk, walking out the door.

What have I been living for all these years? I was an orphan who had been brought up in a camp designed to raise duelers. I was twenty-eight, yet I've never dated, never loved. I've spent my whole life until now solely for the sake of being the strongest.

And for what...

Admiration? Money? Glory?

I had all of that, but never in a million years would I choose to have that over what I had in the town of Ashber.

I missed Alice. I missed Reynolds. I missed Durden. I missed Jasmine. I missed Helen. I missed Angela. I even missed Adam.

...Mother...

...Father...

"COUGH!! COUGH!"

I opened my eyes again, with towering trees and dangling vines filling my vision as I lay on my back. However, this time, the excruciating pain that I was welcomed by told me I wasn't dreaming.

Where was I?

How was I alive?

I tried to get up, but my body doesn't listen. The only thing I was able to manage was turn my head, and even that involved a series of throbbing pains in my neck.

Looking to my right, I spotted my knapsack. I slowly turned my head to my left, gritting my teeth through the pain.

My eyes widened at the sight and I immediately had to resist the urge to vomit. To my left was what was left of the conjurer I had dragged down with me. A pool of blood

surrounded the corpse, whose body probably had more broken bones than ones still intact. I could see the white bones of his ribs jutting out of the sunken cavity of the chest with a pile of his entrails beside him. His limbs were sprawled out at unnatural angles, with the mage's skull shattered in the back with some brain matter oozing out along with blood.

His face was frozen into an expression of surprise and disbelief, except for his completely red eyes, as a trail of dried blood was still visible from his eye sockets. I couldn't turn my head away fast enough. With my already weakened body being assaulted with both the gruesome sight and repugnant smell, I vomited what was left in my stomach until I was left gagging dry heaves.

Even in my past life, I had never come across such a badly mangled corpse. With the nauseating stench and insects feasting on the gore, I couldn't help but feel sick. With parts of my face and neck covered in my own regurgitation, I finally managed to turn my head to rid my sight of the mage's grotesque remains.

How was I still alive?

I couldn't help wondering what had happened while I was unconscious. Clearly, the mage was alive up until the landing... so what happened to me?

I should look very similar to this corpse right about now, maybe even worse, but not only was I okay, I don't even seem to have a broken bone.

I pondered over the possible answers until I was interrupted by a strong grumble from my stomach.

Again, I tried getting up, fighting through my body's protests; the only parts of my body that seem to be listening to me as of now was my right arm and my neck up. I willed mana into my right arm and used my fingers to claw my way, dragging my body, to reach my knapsack. It couldn't have been more than a meter away, but it took over what felt like an hour until I finally managed to reach it. Pulling it closer to me, I rummaged through it with my only able hand until I found what I was looking for: the dried berries and nuts my mother had packed!

I succeeded in pouring a mouthful of the snack that I brought only because of my mother's insistence. My throat, surprised by the sudden flood of food, responded by leaving me in a choking fit of coughs, leading me to another round of agony in my body. Fumbling for the water sack inside my knapsack, I slowly poured a bit of the water into my mouth before placing another handful of the snack into my mouth. Tears rolling down the sides of my face and into my ears, I continued chewing on the dried rations until passing out again, using my knapsack as a makeshift blanket.

My eyes fluttered open as I stirred awake from the brisk bite of cold. Looking around, the position of the first rays of light peaking through the mountains me it was dawn.

This time, I was able to get up, but only with the help of mana. I carefully inspected all of my body, making sure everything was in place before allowing myself to relax.

First thing's first. I made my way to the corpse of the mage while trying to avoid looking at the heinous injuries that caused his demise. Spotting the knife I was looking for, I quickly jerked it out of his thigh.

I wasn't sure how long I would have to be here so having a weapon was critical.

'Oh, you're awake.'

I instantly got into a fighting stance, gritting through the pain from the sudden movement, with my knife in hand, turning to face the carcass.

I swear to God if this corpse is the one that's talking...

A melodic chuckle made me look around for the source of the voice.

'Do not worry. You won't have to worry about that corpse reanimating.'

The voice that seemed to come out of nowhere had a dignified, yet soft quality emanating a sense of royalty. It was powerful and resonant, yet silky and soothing sound that made you want to trust it.

Still on guard, I managed to mutter a less than elegant response.

"Who are you? Are you the one that saved me?"

"Yes, to your second question. As for the first, you will soon find out when you arrive at my dwelling."

This voice seemed awfully sure that I would try and find it.

As if reading my thoughts, she continued, "I am the only one that will be able to get you home from this place, so I advise you to make haste."

That jerked some sense into me. That's right! I had to get back home! Mother! Father! The Twin Horns! My baby sibling! Are they alright? Did they reach Xyrus safely?

If the voice could really take me back home, I had no choice but to find it.

"Ahem, dear uhh... Mr. Voice. May I ask for the directions to your location so that you may bless me with your presence?"

The voice let out another soft chuckle before replying with, "Don't you think it's a little rude to call a lady 'Mister'? And yes, I'll show you the way."

Ahh... so it was a lady.

Immediately, my vision shifted into a bird's-eye view. Zooming out, a location that was roughly around a day's trip to the east came into sight and lighted up before my vision shifted back to normal.

"I recommend departing immediately. It will be a lot safer traveling during the day than when it gets dark." Gently chided the voice.

"Yes Ma'am!" I quickly picked up my knapsack before trotting towards my destination.

It became less painful with each step and, by mid-morning, I was only left with a few aches here and there. Whatever that lady did was some powerful magic. I've never heard or read of casting a spell with that much of a distance. Or maybe she left after casting the spell right before I landed? Then how could she have known that we were falling, and why did she only save me? The more I tried to solve the mystery, the more questions I seemed to end up with.

Hearing a faint gurgling sound, I headed towards the direction, spotting a narrow stream.

"Yes!" I exclaimed.

I was absolutely filthy. My face and neck still had the stench of stomach acid, while my clothes were torn and caked with grime. Almost sprinting, I cannonballed into the stream, vigorously scrubbing clean my face and body. Taking off my clothes and after briefly washing them, I laid them down on a nearby rock to dry. After finishing the refreshing bath, I walked towards my still damp clothes when...

'Kukuku... how pleasantly carefree.'

Reflexively, both my hands shot down to cover my precious area as I hunched my back, trying to make my body as small as possible.

'Don't worry, there wasn't much to see.' I shuddered as I almost felt the Voice wink at me.

How rude! My pride...

Grumbling, I almost wanted to argue that my body wasn't developed, but I chose to ignore the Voice and put on my clothes.

'Aww... don't pout. I apologize,' the Voice stifled a laugh.

Calm your mind, Arthur. A king must be calm...

After I put on my clothes, the perverted voice seemed to go silent. Not minding too much, I rummaged through my bag and dug out the last of my dried rations. Water wasn't going to be a problem for a while since I had just refilled my water sack, but I would need food soon; hopefully the voice would provide me with something.

Looking around, I begin wondering where I was. Since I fell off the mountain towards the east, I must be near the elves' domain. I don't think I'm in the Forest of Elshire because I'm not surrounded by fog. Was I in the Beast Glades? No. There weren't any mana beasts... I spotted a few rabbits and birds, but I've yet to see anything else. Something even stranger that I noticed a bit before was the abundance of mana in this place. It was mostly due to the richness of mana that I was able to recover from my initial state so quickly. Although that still doesn't explain how I survived in the first place, I hoped that the source behind the voice would tell me.

I should hurry.

Aside from the fact that there was no road, it turned out to be a pretty uneventfully peaceful trip, with minimal obstacles and terrains I had to go around. As I drew near the location of the voice, the density in mana was getting richer and thicker. Ignoring the temptation to stop and absorb the surrounding mana, I ventured on. Training wasn't important right now. I needed to get home.

Since everyone probably assumed that I was dead, I couldn't help but worry about Mother and Father. Not so much physically, but for their mental health. I'm concerned Mother and Father wouldn't forgive themselves for my death. The only thought that comforted me was the fact that my mother was pregnant. Yes. At least for the sake of my unborn brother or sister, they'd stay strong.

I reached the area where the Voice directed me towards, but I was unable to see anything besides a cluster of rocks surrounded by a cluster of trees.

'I'm glad you were able to make it here safely,' the Voice echoed confidently, as if it already knew I would.

"Nice to meet you uhh... Ma'am? Miss. Rocks?"

'I'm not a rock, nor a cluster of them. There is a crevice between the back of the adjacent rocks. That's where I'll be,' the Voice chuckled.

Looking around, I managed to spot the small gap, about the width of an adult, between two of the larger rocks that were leaning against each other. The slight breeze coming out from the crevice told me I had found what I was looking for. If it weren't for the Voice directing me to this exact location, I would never have even noticed the small fissure.

'Child. Go on and enter through the crevice, but strengthen yourself with mana before you do.'

I can finally meet Mother and Father soon!

Without a second's hesitation, I slipped in through the gap easily while willing the mana to strengthen my body.

I had expected a platform to step on but instead, I immediately plummeted down the dark hole.

The voice had failed to warn me that I was going to be doing a vertical fall.

'I guess that was why she mentioned using mana to me' was the thought that ran through my head as I descended, screaming at the top of my four-year-old lungs.

Rubbing my b\*\*t, groaning, I slowly supported myself up.

"We finally meet child."

I felt the blood drain from my face as my mouth gape open and eyes bulge. Feeling lightheaded as my legs failed to support me, I crumbled back onto my aching b\*\*t, staring at the one who's been helping me this whole time.

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