Chapter 14: Elaine

The four clones fell like marionettes with their strings cut, awkwardly hitting the floor.

THUMP, THUMP, THUMP, THUMP

If these were normal people, they might have ended up with some nasty bruises, but their bodies were at Yellow. Plus, healing them wasn't that hard.

"Why do you keep messing with others?!" Elaine yelled.

She let the glowing whip fizzle out into a harmless spray of water, soon forming a faint puddle on the marble tiles. Then, she glared at her cousins, scoffing when they took a step back. The cowards only dared to bully those weaker than them.

Turning to Percy, she dragged him out of the hall as he looked at her in amusement. He wasn't as defenceless as he used to be. *She knew that*. Still, seeing those morons treating him as their lesser irked her to no end.

'He deserved to be born at a higher grade than them. No. He deserved to be born at a higher grade than me.*'*

So absorbed was she in her thoughts that she was taken by surprise when Percy stopped abruptly.

"Where have you been over the last month?" he asked, scanning her.

She looked down at her body too. Her arms were covered in bandages, a few scrapes and bruises visible on her skin.

"I was out doing missions."

"For a whole *month*?!" he frowned.

Then, he winced. That's when Elaine remembered she was still holding him. Letting go, she quickly noticed the skin on his wrist was pink.

'Shit! I must have put more strength than I realized.'

"I took a bunch of them at once to save time." she answered.

He nodded.

"I see. Must be convenient, serving as target practice for archers right after trekking through a jungle. I'll try it sometime too. Why waste time *healing* in between?"

She chuckled.

"It wasn't *that* bad. Grandpa will fix me up in no time."

Percy turned around, gesturing at her to follow. Only after they'd made a quick stop by Archibald's office to get her patched up did they head back towards the garden.

"Grandpa seemed really swamped today. Has anything happened while I was gone?" she asked.

"I don't know. Maybe he needs to manage his time better." Percy scratched his head, looking at her rather awkwardly.

Elaine narrowed her eyes but didn't say anything else.

After exiting the mansion, they found a nice spot on the grass to sit. It was calming, listening to the crickets chirping, as faint shadows of clouds brushed over their heads. The garden was admittedly less exotic than the vibrant forests and swamps she'd recently travelled through, but she didn't have to worry about an ogre or a basilisk sneaking up on her here.

"Care to tell me what happened?" he asked.

"What do you mean?"

"I know testing my magic on that goblin wasn't the prettiest sight, but you could have talked to me instead of avoiding me."

She frowned.

'Is that what he thought?'

"I'm not avoiding you…" she muttered weakly.

"Really?" he raised an eyebrow. "Because you barely said anything on the way back. Then you vanished for a month, putting yourself through a mission gauntlet."

SIGH

That wasn't it. *Not at all*.

But she couldn't tell him. What was she supposed to say? That she felt guilty watching him struggle? Did that even make sense?

Back when she found him on the floor, she took care of him for a week. She'd known he'd done something dangerous with his ability, but she didn't realize just *how* dangerous until the test.

'A soul clone!'

Percy had ripped his very *soul* apart! The mere thought made her skin crawl.

Still, it wasn't until she heard the goblin's shriek that she truly came to terms with the severity of the situation. Watching the creature squirm over the tiniest scratch, she couldn't fathom what Percy had experienced after tearing the whole thing up.

Yet, after waking up, he spent the next few days *training*! Even while travelling, he kept practicing *on horseback*! Even *after* his injuries!

*'The ones he got because
I couldn't stay awake half an hour longer.'*

Despite all the odds stacked against him, he never stopped pushing forward, doing everything he could to get stronger. Meanwhile, here she was, with her Green core, everything handed to her on a silver platter, getting treated like royalty by her whole family just because she'd been born lucky.

The irony made her sick to her stomach.

"Elaine?" Percy looked at her with concern. She might have stayed silent for too long.

"It's nothing. I just figured I should train a bit harder. To live up to grandpa's expectations."

He nodded.

"You were right, you know." Percy said.

She tilted her head.

"About baldy. He's not that bad once you get to know him."

"You've been spending time together!" she raised an eyebrow.

"Some." he grinned.

"That's great! What do you talk about?"

He fell back, resting his head on the grass before replying. "All sorts of things really. Like how many times he caught uncle Gareth skipping on his shift. Or more recently, he's helping me figure out how to use my bloodline."

Elaine felt her jaw tighten upon hearing that, clenching some dirt in her hand.

"Don't…" she muttered.

"Hmm?"

"Please, don't use your ability again." she struggled to get the words out, her voice cracking.

Percy gave her an odd look.

"Elaine… My ability is all I have. I can't give it up."

"What's even the point?!" she snapped. "I don't want to sound harsh! I really, *really* don't! I don't want to sound like *them!*"

She felt hot streams trickle down her cheeks.

"But why do all this to yourself?! Even if you become the *strongest* Yellow core on Remior, it won't mean a damn thing!!!"

The moment the last word left her mouth, she felt her gut churn. She'd always hated herself just for *thinking* those things.

'And now I told him to his face.'

Elaine kept her gaze fixed on the ground, absentmindedly tracking a ladybug as it walked up a blade of grass. She didn't look at him. *She couldn't.* She knew what she'd just said was plain *cruel.* Maybe Percy would never speak to her again.

The thought hurt, but it was ok.

'As long as he listens.'

The silence stretched on for a couple of minutes, even the crickets' chirps now sounding muted, as if they understood they should pipe down a notch.

"If that's all I ever amount to be… then so be it." Percy said, his voice calm.

Elaine lifted her eyes. He was looking up at the sky. No. His gaze seemed to pierce through it, searching for something beyond. He wasn't upset or angry.

Then his eyes met hers.

He smiled.

"Either way, I won't be satisfied until I've done everything I can."

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Elaine was in her room, her eyes closed. Resting on a proper bed after a month in the wilderness was nice, but her thoughts were locked in her earlier conversation with Percy. By now she'd be a fool to believe she stood a chance of changing his mind. Still, it was comforting to know their relationship hadn't soured.

In any case, there wasn't much point in ruminating over things she couldn't change. Instead, she should focus on those she *could*.

'Then, I won't be satisfied either...'

She opened her eyes, staring up at the ceiling with resolve. Elaine was a Yellow-born. She *would* reach Violet, no matter the cost, to support her grandpa and her family.

But she shook her head.

'No.'

Not *nearly* good enough. If it was Percy in her shoes, he wouldn't be satisfied with that little.

'I won't stop until White, elevating the Avalon House to one of the Great Houses.'

Percy wouldn't live long enough to see her reach Violet, let alone White. The thought made a lump form in her throat. *But it was ok*. She could at least take care of others like him.

Having made up her mind, she closed her eyes again. She would give herself this one night's sleep. She also had to restock her supply of elixirs before heading out.

Training and missions couldn't speed up her advancement, but she could still hone her spells. It had been a long time since her Status registered her Crude magic.

'It's about time I take the next step.'