Wanderer 35

Chapter 35: Scorpions

SHING

The azure flash sliced through the thick carapace as if it was butter. It might as well have been, against the spell of a Green. Elaine swung her arms a few more times, three whips lashing out with each move, dicing the rest of the creatures into pieces.

“Careful not to damage their stingers or their venom glands. It’s what we’re here for.” Enid said.

The blonde girl was having a bit more trouble at Yellow, but her earth magic kept the enemies at bay at least.

“You don’t have to worry about her, Enid. Princess knows what she’s doing.” Aleyn said.

Having inherited the bloodline, the boy’s life affinity didn’t help him much in a direct confrontation. Still, he reduced the pressure on his cousins by distracting the beasts with his clones.

“All I’m saying is, each scorpion is worth four silver. It would be a waste to lose some.”

“Alright, stop bickering. I think we managed to preserve most of them.” Elaine said.

She wiped the sweat off her brow as the last of the creatures fell limp on the sand. Next, she walked to one of the more intact carcasses and sat against it. Drawing the last drops of mana from her core, she manifested a mouthful of water to quench her thirst. The worst thing about the desert was the suffocating heat. To add insult to injury, it wasn’t particularly suited to her affinity either. Refilling her reserves took twice as long here.

Still, she took deep breaths to recover as much as she could while resting. Enid soon joined her, also in need of a break. It wasn’t like they hadn’t considered helping Aleyn harvest the loot, but the boy had volunteered to delegate the menial task to his clones. Instead, she summoned her Status.

Elaine Avalon

Mana core:

Spells:

SIGH

It irked her every time she looked at it. Her first and only Crude spell had registered several years ago, yet the upgrade still eluded her.

‘Reaching White my ass.’ she smiled bitterly.

She’d resolved to obtain a Refined spell even before Percy’s return from Huehue, yet here she was, with nothing more than a single Crude one over a year later. Not just that, but her cousin had achieved what she failed to, while still being at Orange! And he had three other spells too! Yet, despite being two full grades above him, Elaine couldn’t even manage it with Percy holding her hand, walking her through the process! Strengthening her body and tempering her mana channels had been fine, but she just couldn’t figure out the correct pattern for her affinity.

‘Such an embarrassment.’

The only thing she could do was to resume taking mission after mission, focusing on her Whip instead. At least, she could now summon a whopping six constructs at once. Sadly, sheer quantity didn’t a Refined spell make...

SIGH

“Alright, that’s all of them.” Aleyn said, breaking her out of her thoughts.

Four men stood behind him, each with a face identical to his own, save for their soulless gazes. They didn't utter a word of complaint, despite the heavy-looking sacks they were holding over their shoulders, filled to the brim with grimy scorpion parts. One even had a stinger sticking out of the bag, passing just inches from the clone's cheek, but he didn't seem bothered in the slightest.

"Finally!" Enid jumped to her feet excitedly. "I can't wait to take a bath and sleep on a proper bed!"

She looked at Elaine expectantly, silently urging her to get a move on. Faced with her cousin's eagerness, the latter acquiesced, pushing herself up as the corner of her lips curved upwards. Aleyn and Enid were both Orange-borns, but they didn't waste their time wallowing in self-pity. What right did she have to be unhappy?

The trio was about to head out, when a sudden burst of sand blinded them. Elaine opened her eyes just a second later, only to be greeted by a gruesome sight. Three figures were lying on the ground, pinned down by long stingers. Each was twice as thick and thrice as long as those of the regular scorpions, making them resemble lances more than monster parts. They were a deep purple colour, dripping with droplets a shade paler.

This story originates from Royal Road. Ensure the author gets the support they deserve by reading it there.

SSSSSS

Every time the liquid landed on the victims' skin, it sizzled, releasing smoke that carried a putrid smell with it. The appalling scene made Elaine tremble in abject terror for a moment.

Luckily, she soon regained her wit. Those three weren't her real cousins. Just clones. Aleyn and Enid were both ok, lying a few meters away, fortunate enough the abomination hadn't targeted them.

"Get up! Fast!" she yelled, already stirring the mana in her sternum.

She'd only managed to recover about a third, but it would have to do. Her cousins heard her, scrambling to stand. Sadly, they weren't fast enough.

SNIP

A second mound of sand exploded just under where Aleyn was, a deafening sound ringing in their ears.

As soon as the cloud settled somewhat, Elaine saw a colossal pincer pointing towards the sky, chunks of wet gore hanging off its serrated edges. Its base was drenched in a crimson pool which kept deepening as the blood gushed out of the two halves of her cousin's lifeless body.

"AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAHHHH!!!"

Enid's scream was the only thing that stopped Elaine from throwing up on the spot. Prying her eyes off Aleyn's corpse, she turned towards her last surviving teammate. A second pincer had pierced through the sand at some point, but luckily it had missed. Although shaken, Enid was still in one piece.

Elaine dashed, ignoring the protests of her tired legs, picking her cousin off the ground as she kept running, trying to put distance from the monster. She felt the sand shake as a tremor coursed through her surroundings.

Resisting the urge to look back, she activated her Mana Sense instead. A bright Green star thrummed in the beast's frame, as multiple streams of the same colour flowed through its visage. It was using its pincers to pull itself up, its body already halfway above the surface. This scorpion was the size of an elephant, with three long tails flailing above it.

Being the same grade as the creature, Elaine knew she should be able to defeat it normally. But not with so little mana and not while keeping Enid safe. Right now, her best course of action was to flee.

Unfortunately, the beast wasn't quite ready to let them go, however. As soon as it was done unlodging itself from the makeshift tunnel, its three pairs of legs began stabbing and pushing against the sand, the scorpion's heavy frame accelerating towards them. Like a battering ram, the abomination crashed through the dunes, barely slowing down.

'It's catching up.'

Elaine grimaced. There was no way she could outrun the monster in its own element. Certainly not while carrying somebody. She summoned all her strength to toss her cousin as far ahead as she could manage. Perhaps the fall might have injured a regular human, but the girl was at Yellow, so she just rolled harmlessly on the soft sand.

Not that she would survive long if Elaine failed to kill the beast. Hopefully, this would keep her out of the fight though. Turning around, Elaine took another deep breath, briefly entertaining the thought of breaking through the last barrier and mastering Circulation right then and there.

Then, she chuckled bitterly.

'Not a chance.'

Even if she could miraculously come up with the burst of inspiration she needed, the arid desert air made this the worst possible place to circulate water mana. No. She'd have to make do with the only spell she had. Her measly reserves wouldn't last for a prolonged fight either.

'I guess I'll have to kill it in one shot.'

The scorpion approached rapidly. Its massive body was only a dozen meters away when a wave of calm took over her, a strange thought passing through her mind.

'Is this what Percy feels like every time he gets in a fight?'

Elaine had completed countless missions, but she couldn't remember coming this close to dying before. Most of the time, her Green core was enough to make quick work of the Orange and Yellow beasts she hunted. Even the few Green ones she'd faced had been under better circumstances. Was this how it felt to put her life on the line?

She shook her head. This wasn't the time for silly thoughts. Drawing all the mana from her core and summoning all the strength in her muscles, she spun her body towards the beast to build up as much momentum as she could manage. She figured every little bit might make the difference. Three whips formed in each hand, but she didn't stop there. She willed them to turn even firmer, even sharper than before, as a fourth one began to manifest. By the time the shadow of the scorpion loomed over her, she

could hardly even see it. It was all a blur, the spinning blades of azure dominating her sight, as they whistled shrilly, slicing through the air.

The impact she did feel, however. The whips bent, a couple of them even snapping as a mountain collided with them. Having absorbed most of the weight, her constructs saved her from being squashed into paste, but the wind was still knocked out of her lungs, waves of pain rippling through her body. Her joints buckled, her bones creaked, and she could feel her soles burn as she and the monster both slid through the scorching sand.

But she didn't stop spinning. She kept focusing on her whips – her only way out – as she commanded them to reform, to sharpen even more, to carve out anything in their path.

SHRIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIII…

The grating sound intensified as she picked up speed. The mana was dwindling at a frightening rate, the whips thinning into mere threads… but they still felt stronger than before, somehow.

Elaine didn't stop. She couldn't stop. A moment's hesitation would mean her death. Enid's too. She kept spinning in place, her world consumed into a whirlwind of azure, as all other senses vanished.

[Congratulations! Your spell has evolved: Whip – Crude -> Kraken's Gambit – Refined!]

It wasn't until a long time later she realized she was no longer sliding through the sand. The grating screech had stopped too. There was nothing pushing against her. But she didn't let go of the mana right away. She didn't want to risk it.

"…Elaine!"

At some point, she scarcely registered a voice. Enid's.

"It's over! It's dead!" her cousin added after a moment.

Only then did she allow the spell to fizzle out, plopping down weakly.

SPLASH

Yet, it wasn't the dry mound of sand she was expecting. Her everything still spun, though she scarcely registered a greenish chunk of wet chitin in front of her eyes. She tried shifting around. All her muscles hurt. She felt more of the goo around her with every movement. She was practically swimming in the stuff.

"I'll need some help getting home…"