Wanderer 43

Chapter 43: Aleyn

The atmosphere was sombre as the crowd of hundreds stood outside, clad in black robes. A deep silence might have been more appropriate for the occasion, but nobody had let the crickets know to stop chirping, or the birds to avoid carelessly flying over the garden.

Perhaps, the sky should have looked gloomier too, but Remior's sun still shone brightly, oblivious to the bitter sobs of the grieving mother, and the occasional crackles of firewood snapping in the pyre.

SIGH

Archibald let out a turbid breath, held inside for a touch too long, as he watched Seryna – his daughter-in-law – scatter her son's ashes in the wind. Fortunately, Aballach was not here to mourn the boy, having died in the tragedy years ago, along with the other Red-borns.

Truth be told, Archibald had a personal preference for burials over cremations. The idea of having a grave to visit – a way to keep the deceased always close – just sounded better. In fact, many of the younger families still performed them to this day.

Sadly, this wasn't an option for the older ones, like the Avalon House, who had bid farewell to thousands of members over their millennia-long history. If they buried everyone, their mansion would be little more than an island amidst a sea of graves by now.

No, the Avalons wouldn't get a grave… They'd all have to settle for a few words in a book, listing their relationships and achievements. The Yellow-borns who lived the longest would get a full page. Some – like Archibald himself – might even get a couple. As for the Red-borns and Orange-borns who died young… they'd have to make do with a paragraph.

'Was I wrong?'

It was precisely because things like this kept happening that he had maintained his distance from the family. He had to be a leader! Could he afford to break down every time he lost somebody?

Putting his own emotions aside was what was best for everyone. If anything, it helped reduce losses such as today's.

'Little good it did Aleyn though.'

Archibald's interactions with Percy had made him reconsider his stance. Perhaps, his role as the cold patriarch of the family served their House well – for the majority of people – but what about those few who received the short end of the stick? If Aleyn had been destined to die young, hadn't he deserved a grandpa in his short life?

'Heck, didn't I deserve to know my grandson before he was gone?'

Elaine walked over, breaking him out of his thoughts. Her expression was downtrodden – she hadn't spoken a word since Enid helped her back a few days ago, carrying a sack with Aleyn's remains in the other hand.

'She must be blaming herself.'

He placed his hand on her shoulder, squeezing it gently.

By all accounts, this could still be considered a positive outcome for the family. Elaine – the only Yellow-born in the team – had not only survived, but returned home with a new Refined spell. In fact, the pragmatic leader in him should have been overjoyed. Perhaps, they should even be celebrating rather than mourning. Yet, the mere thought made his stomach churn.

"Grandpa… Where is Percy? I haven't seen him since I got back."

A lump got stuck in Archibald's throat. Breaking more bad news to the girl was the last thing he wanted.

"He left a few weeks ago. He should be in the Alchemists' Guild by now."

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“What?! Why?! He didn’t even say goodbye!” she exclaimed, only catching herself a moment later after seeing the others giving her weird looks.

“What happened?” she whispered a moment later.

“The boy probably grew a conscience.” another voice interjected.

A gallant man approached them, the air around him crackling with power as he stopped just a meter away.

“What’s that supposed to mean?!” Elaine scowled at him.

“It means you and father have already spoiled that Red-born for long enough. It’s best he tries to pay his own way in the world. He’ll fail of course, but that ought to teach him that precious resources aren’t meant for his ilk.” Galahad replied in a casual tone, his words sharp like knives.

But he wasn’t done.

“My only worry is that he’ll embarrass our House in the eyes of others, but I suppose that’s a small price to pay to stop pouring elixirs down the drain.”

The girl looked ready to snap at her uncle, but Archibald squeezed her shoulder a bit more firmly to stop her.

“That’s enough son. This is not the time or the place to be badmouthing anyone, let alone your nephew. Besides, I think you might be surprised the next time you meet Percy.”

He didn’t like Galahad’s callousness, but it would be hypocritical of him to get angry. After all, he was the one who had moulded his son into this, preparing him into a future leader of the House.

Strictly speaking, Galahad simply embodied the principles he had taught, nothing more, nothing less. In fact, one might even argue the man adhered to them even more closely than Archibald himself, not allowing emotions to seep into his thought process.

Soon, Galahad left. It wasn't until an hour later that the rest of their relatives had too.

"Is he going to be alright?" she asked once they were alone in the garden.

He nodded.

"Don't worry about him. Micky advanced to Orange and they needed a good place to hunt and earn elixirs. I'm sure they'll thrive there."

His words seemed to ease the tension in her eyes. Although, it wasn't gone entirely.

"Elaine. It wasn't your fault. Scorpion Kings are rare, and you couldn't have prevented the ambush." he said after a moment.

"But it was my fault… If only I'd learned Circulation like you and Percy… Maybe…" she stammered, the corners of her eyes glistening with tears.

Archibald shook his head.

"You wouldn't have even managed to activate it in time to save Aleyn. Dwelling on it doesn't help anyone."

Elaine didn't say anything, looking down at her feet. The two remained there for another few minutes, before he spoke again.

"What are you planning to do now? Will you keep going on missions?"

The girl tilted her head up, giving him a firm look.

“No. Perhaps you are right. Even if I had mastered Circulation, maybe it wouldn’t have made a difference. But it might the next time. Or the one after.”

She clenched her fists before continuing.

“I won’t leave the mansion until I master it too.”

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Archibald was sitting cross-legged in the inner garden, basking under the gentle radiance of the jade tree. Tossing the prized treasure a glance, he remembered what he had told Percy over a year ago.

‘I can’t give up the tree on a gamble. Let alone you, even if it was Elaine having a second core, I couldn’t do that. The tree might help me protect our family next year. Your second core might need centuries to pay off, if it ever does.’

The words already rang hollow as they echoed in his head, making him chuckle. Mere months after he’d said that, Percy had brought Circulation back from Huehue, helping him grow far stronger than he ever would through the tree.

‘Let’s not waste it then.’

Taking a deep breath, he spent a moment appreciating the refreshing fragrance with its minty aftertaste, before guiding the dense mana to his channels. Not long after, green lines glowed under his skin, swirling and branching out like vines.

Next, he placed his palms against each other, as he sent a wave of mana rippling through his body, before bouncing off his skin and towards his hands. Soon, a small verdant bubble the size of a pea formed, softly pulsing like a tiny heart.

Archibald normally only maintained 60 clones – a mere quarter of what he was capable of – to ensure he still had access to 75% of his mana reserves at any given time.

However, now that he had the option of falling back to Circulation in a pinch, he had decided to double the number of clones he had on standby. The fact he could create them faster using the technique was a nice bonus too.

As for the tree – its main purpose was providing inspiration to life users when developing their spells. Archibald already possessed a top-tier Secret Art combining his magic and his bloodline, but with Circulation and twice as many clones, he was aiming to improve upon it.

'You kids won't be the only ones getting stronger…'

Whatever happened, he was the patriarch of the family. He'd keep them all safe at any cost. As for the next poor fool who decided to mess with them…

He was in for a nasty surprise.