

SPELLCRAFT 141

SPELLCRAFT: Reincarnation Of A Magic Scholar

Chapter 141: The Way Forward

"Pfffft!" I nearly spurted out saliva in amusement.

Stefan went through all that trouble only to say that? It appeared he was taking the whole 'rival' thing a bit too far.

"Oh? He said that? interesting..."

As my grin intensified, I noticed the worried expressions displayed by Edward and Anabelle.

"Those guys belong to the Upper Class, right? Are you sure you should be crossing them?"

"Yeah, I mean... can we really compete against them?"

Their tone displayed worry and inferiority. I could tell from the shades in their eyes that these two had given up on competing against the top dogs. To be fair, their disposition was justified. Normally, those who were already labeled as inferior couldn't rise above the superior ones.

Plus, they had only started actively learning the use of Mana for three weeks. With so much gap in experience between them and the supposed adversaries, shrinking to safety was the natural course of action.

However...

"You guys don't need to worry about a thing. We have two months, don't we? That is enough time to surpass those guys!"

I intentionally omitted the fact that these two were already stronger than all Middle-Class Students, and we're already close to reaching the level of Upper-Class ones.

They needed to work harder, and I wasn't going to settle for 'barely enough'. The fact that I invested so much time and effort in these guys meant I expected massive returns.

"You all got amazing familiars, and your Mana Cores are in acceptable states. For the next two months, we'll be mainly focusing on spells for Anabelle, and techniques for Edward!"

Slowly, I saw the fog of uncertainty clear away from their eyes. My confidence seemed to be doing the trick. Since I had brought them this far... they could only expect me to stick by my promise!

"Yeah, about the techniques... Jared, there's something I need to tell you..."

Edward now seemed super serious, most likely the most since I knew him.

"Ohhh, so you're finally going to say it!" Anabelle beamed in surprise and satisfaction.

'So she knows about this too?'

Of course, she would! Anabelle and Edward hardly kept anything from each other.

"What's the matter, Ed?" I smiled softly, trying to ease the grave expression on my comrade's face.

His body was twitching and his fists remained clenched. Clearly what he wanted to say wasn't so easy for him to divulge. Still, one thing about the boy before me was his unyielding spirit.

The determination in his eyes told me that he had resolved to speak about it.

"The truth is... my family has a Martial Arts technique. It's a School that has been passed down for generations, and my father passed it down to me before he died."

My eyes widened in surprise.

'A Martial Arts inheritance? Edward has such a thing?!'

"I used one of its basic forms on you when we dueled... The 9 Fundamental Precepts."

My memory flashed to the moment when he used the first form of the technique on me 'REND'. I had to admit that the move possessed power and speed, but it was too straightforward—not suitable to be used against someone who also had Martial Arts.

'It's most likely a subpar technique...' My thoughts trailed.

But, it wasn't like I could tell Edward that his family's heirloom was inferior and undesirable to my tastes. Compared to the techniques I wanted him to learn, the modern ones just couldn't compare.

Still, I was fascinated by the fact that he had an inheritance. Usually, only top Martial Arts families possessed such a thing, and Edward wasn't really one. He was a commoner, having no parents and only his talent in Martial Arts to rely on.

His Martial Arts inheritance must have meant a lot to him considering it took him great courage to tell me, someone he already considered a friend. There was no way I was going to trample on his pride and joy.

"That sounds interesting... I would love to see these techniques." I replied with a smile.

"Well, I got permission from Ainzlark's authorities to be able to bring them with me to the Academy. I keep them in my room, so..."

My head moved in a nod.

"I get it. Could you perhaps bring the 9 Fundamental Precepts Book after the weekend, no, let's meet up tomorrow... and you'll show me."

Edward's unsure eyes began to light up in passion, most likely happy about my interest in his techniques.

"Certainly! Let's do that!"

Anabelle, who had been left out of our conversation so far looked a little miffed by her isolation and butted in.

"You know, Edward hasn't even mastered the 9 Precepts, the most basic of the Martial Arts inheritance he has."

The young warrior instantly grew flustered by her comment and blushed in embarrassment.

"I-I... I had no one to teach me! It's too complex and profound for me to understand by myself!"

I smiled as I watched the two of them bickering. Seated on my bed and being surrounded by two allies as we discussed the future... it didn't seem too bad.

The excitement welling up within me couldn't be denied as I allowed my thoughts to drift in the direction of my previous companions— Gawain Lenard the Sword God, Jane Ursula the Mad Witch, Ford Zesshi the Grand Mage, Raphael Noel of the Thousand Songs, and The Indestructible Immortal, Dom! These were my closest allies and the ones I called friends.

Of course, there were others, but none made an impression on me as compared to them. After all, the battle we fought so long ago still rang loudly in the heart of everyone in the land.

The Celestial War, the clash between Heroes and Demons... the battle that determined the fate of the Eastern Empire, no, the world at the time... we were the ones who fought in it!

But, that was all in the past. The threat had been vanquished and even centuries after my death there had been no sight of the great darkness that appeared all those years ago. My main concern now was right in front of me!

'I can't wait for the future!'

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Chapter 142: The Classes Converge

[2 Months Later]

After training for months and honing our skills, after tempering our bodies and studying ceaselessly, after pushing ourselves beyond our limits... the moment had finally arrived.

The Inter-Class Exchange!

As the name implied, it was the convergence of the three Classes of the three years. This event was to simulate a competition where the respective classes competed and tested their skills.

From what I knew, the Exchange started as a means of allowing students to compete with one another and enhance their skills. Back when there was no segregation and discrimination caused by Class, the Exchange was simply a way for all the students to determine their strengths.

However, now it had morphed into something else entirely... it was an event where the weak were crushed by the strong—that is, the Upper-Class elite totally obliterating those of the Lower-Class.

A competition between the Scholars, Martial Artists, and Magic-Users of the Lower Class, Middle Class, and Upper Class among the First years, Second years, and Third years!

The ultimate in-house Academy competition that only happened once a year—that was the definition of the Inter-Class Exchange!

And here I was... about to participate in what would change my life forever.

"Whoah!!!" Edward and Anabelle made extremely impressed sounds as we entered the massive hall where the competition would take place.

From outside the dome, I could tell that this place was beyond huge. Compared to our examination center back then, the hall was most likely thrice as big!

As we went through the entrance, we saw a flight of chairs forming a circle around the stage, similar to a colosseum. It sure brought some memories, but I only smiled—in contrast to the two beside me who kept beaming in awe.

The seats, while spreading round in a close circle, were segregated.

The first years had their seats located the furthest from the entrance, having obvious gaps that served as stairs to divide the Classes.

The Second year's seats were on the left side of the entrance, similarly divided.

The third years took the right.

The hall seemed disconnected from the outside world, with no windows in sight. The ceilings seemed to spread as high as the sky, and the light brimming from its expanse was glorious.

Thanks to the magic lights, most likely continually influenced by Mana supplies, the hall was brightly lit. As for ventilation, there had to be openings all around us, or maybe it was the influence of Magic. Regardless, the air was cool and the ambiance of the hall, though already chock-full of students, was pleasant.

"We should start moving..." I muttered to my two allies who were still drooling at the sight unfolding before them.

I already noticed a bunch of students who were drawing closer to us, and it would be rude to serve as hindrances in their path.

My worries were not needed, though, since the pathway for walking was large enough to contain ten people walking in a straight, horizontal line—shoulder to shoulder.

Still, it was better to keep moving in order to avoid any 'scenes'. We were only Lower Class First years, after all. The fodder of fodder.

Our pace was not hurried, but the excitement made us, no, the two beside me move faster than usual. I simply matched their pace.

In no time, we got to where our seats were located, a flight of over two hundred chairs, certainly too much for only Lower Class First Years. I was certain that this hall was used for something else as well, considering it was too large for students who were not even up to five hundred!

"Where should we sit, Jared?" Anabelle asked me in anticipation.

A broad smile formed on my face. It mattered not where one sat, the sight of the event would still be evident for all to see. Still, for the best experience in an arena like this, the obvious choice was...

"Up! We're going to the very top!"

Fortunately, my comrades seemed to agree and we made our way upward using the flight of stairs.

I felt some eyes fall on us, obviously students who knew of our identity—rather, my identity.

Despite the three months that had elapsed since we all resumed Ainzlark, it appeared my impression of people remained. It was a good thing, but not always.

Ignoring their stares, I walked elegantly and made my way to the edge of the row of ten seats, resting my buttocks on the last one in the row. Anabelle and Edward sat respectively beside me, though the latter appeared to be sulking.

'He probably wants a direct seat beside me...' I reasoned with a smile.

However, this time I wasn't going to tolerate being in the middle. After all, next to the edge of the row where I sat were the seats of the Middle-Class students, and beyond were the Upper-Class, only segregated by the stairs.

'I want a better sight of the competitors!'

More students trickled in, and despite the large hall, there was only one entrance.

Multiple exits were in sight, but there were blocked at the moment.

Once an individual got in, they wouldn't be able to leave until the competition was over for the day. This was why Anabelle, Edward, and I took our time before coming in.

The opposite was also true, though. If one came later than the expected time frame, they would be locked out of the hall until the Exchange concluded for the day.

I noticed that a few more students trickled in, but my focus wasn't on them. The ones that caught my attention were already seated.

Stefan and Maria sat a distance from me, both at the topmost row as well. Their eyes darted in my direction and a smile formed on my face. The look in Stefan's eyes told me he was ready, and the disconcerting expression of Maria just made me confused about what went on in her head.

Still on their row was someone else who sat at the edge of the seats, closer to the Third years. He had a strange demeanor and I hadn't noticed him in the Academy until now.

'Who is that kid...?!'

I was surprised that, out of Upper-Class students, there existed one I couldn't even recognize. There were supposed to be 12 Upper-Class members, yet I was seeing thirteen in their seats.

'I knew it! That guy wasn't with us during the exams.'

But, this conclusion begged yet another question, something I tried wrapping my head around. If he didn't take the exams and was still an Upper-Class student, that meant there was something peculiar about him. I couldn't comprehend it, but it appeared the Exchange was going to be more interesting than I had initially thought.

'I suppose I have one extra thing to look forward to!'

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Chapter 143: The Exchange Begins!

"Welcome, students... to the Inter-Class Exchange!" A magnanimous voice boomed from the stage.

Instantly, the students burst forth in response. Well, most of them were the heated second years and Third years who most likely looked forward to having rematches with their fellow students after previous attempts.

The First Years were also excited, some making glorious noises. Of course, I fell silent despite the anticipation I had.

The man who stood on the stage was exquisitely dressed, as expected of our moderator. The arena, which took up a bulk of the hall, was so wide that I reckoned over a thousand people could fit in there. It brought certainty to me that this hall was most definitely used for something other than the Exchange.

Looking at the speaker, it was the same as the one we had during our exams. I recognized him well—Klaus Tallman.

'So, he's the moderator this time as well... I wonder why?'

"As you know, this event marks the beginning of a blood-curdling rivalry between the students who are experiencing this for the first time, and the continuation of a heated competitive spirit among the first and second years."

The responses of the students told Klaus point-blank that he was right.

"The Exchange will occupy all seven days of the week! Yes, that's right. It will be an all-out internal competition, so the length is very much understandable!"

Neron Kaelid had already informed us of this fact, so none of us were surprised. Still, it was quite amazing that we would spend seven days competing.

"The first three days will be the preliminary rounds, whittling down the competitions to five each. After that, the next three days will be the final matches of each year... it will be quite heated indeed!"

My heart beat faster as Klaus kept speaking.

"As for the last day... it will be the greatest treat and the ultimate battle which will round up the events of the Inter-School Exchange! Yes... it's the battle among the Elite Ten of the three Classes!!!"

More roars and screeches spread across the hall, and I knew why.

The Elite Ten were the most powerful and talented students in each Class. The rankings were made irrespective of the year a student belonged. So long as they could defeat another member of the Elite, they automatically gained the position. Our Lower Class had ten of such students, same as the Middle and Upper Class.

So, for the last day of the Inter-Class Exchange, these students would compete for the right to become... Rankers!

"Huu, this is exciting!" My voice leaked out as I couldn't contain myself anymore.

Being amid students who fought with their pride and honor on the line to prove their worth... was too exciting.

Martial Artists would use their various techniques to showcase why they were the best in the Martial Arts section.

Scholars would make use of their intellect to solve various problems in order to outwit the other for the Scholarship section.

Finally, the Magic Users would go all out to defeat their opponents using their adept manipulation of mana and their deep knowledge of Spells for the Magic Section.

These three sections made up the Inter-School Exchange, a reason why it took a total of seven days to complete.

However, since this wasn't a strict academic program and had no effect on the scores gotten from our respective courses, it was possible for students to register for participation in any section... or not to register at all!

For the Exchange, I had Anabelle go for the Magic Section, same as me. Edward, of course, would be contesting in Martial Arts.

It was not a team match, so it wasn't possible for Ana and me to collaborate, but since we were matched against students from other classes, we wouldn't need to face ourselves at all.

Out of everyone I had to watch out for, the Upper-Class students had the bulk of talent, naturally. People like Stefan Netherlore, Maria Helmsworth, and even Ivan Smith, had my interests.

Of course, the new face was also on my list since I knew nothing about him. Of everything one needed to fear most, the unknown topped the list.

"Now then, without further ado... I shall be introducing your judges!!!"

Pointing toward the edge of the stage, a tall platform emerged. I was certain earth magic was at work since it appeared so seamlessly. The platform was made up of sturdy tiles and began floating in the air.

The platform in the air levitated, and three seats with desks were placed atop it. A bright light sparked, and in an instant, three people occupied the judges' seats.

A wry smile formed on my face as I noticed our academic supervisor, Damien Lawcroft at the center of the seat. Legris Damien, another familiar face sat on the left, while someone I hadn't seen before occupied the right.

"These Senior Lecturers who are well-versed in the art of Magic and Martial Arts will be accumulating your points and judging your performance based on merit."

Silence filled the hall as a result of the huge respect we placed on the highly esteemed figures that sat on the floating block of tiles.

"The rules shall now be displayed for everyone to see. These judges will completely adhere to the regulations when compiling the results and as competitors, you should too. Please note that cheating is strictly forbidden, and you will never be able to get away with it. That much I can guarantee!"

The fact that he emphasized cheating meant some idiots had tried that before. It almost made me laugh that someone would attempt such a thing when experts keenly watched their every move.

The moment Klaus finished announcing his piece, large panels appeared on all four corners of the stage, displaying the rules to everyone.

The panels, similar to the board that displayed our results back then, were easy to read and had to have required an impeccable use of mana to create.

"Hmm, let's see..."

Looking at them now, I could understand why the exam required judges. It was going to be an intense match!

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Chapter 144: Battle Royale (Pt 1)

[INTER-CLASS EXCHANGE REGULATIONS]

- The Use Of Items To Aid In The Exchange Is Not Accepted.
- The Use Of Familiars Is Not Accepted.
- Killing Of Your Opponent Is Not Accepted.
- Weapons Will Be Provided For Those Who Require Arms For Combat (Martial Artists)
- Participants Are To Fight All-Out, Not Holding Anything Back (Intentional Attempt To Kill Is Exempted)
- Criteria For Victory Is; The Surrender Of The Opponent, The Opponent Going Unconscious, The Incapability Of The Opponent To Fight, Or The Opponent Engaging In Malpractice
- The Winner Is Determined By The Judges.
- Once The Opponent Is Seen To Be Unable To Fight, Participants Are To Refrain From Further Attacks.
- Breaking The Aforementioned Rule Can Make The Participant Liable For Disqualification If Decided So By The Judges.
- Breaking Any Of The Other Aforementioned Rules Can Lead To Automatic Disqualification.
- Mode Of Competition And Other Information Will Be Given By The Moderator.

[END OF INFORMATION]

Everyone seemed to carefully read through the rules, and I was no exception. I didn't know whether to say they were to my advantage or not, but these rules placed a severe handicap on me—no, a lot of people.

'We can't use familiars or any external aid! Even weapons are given by the moderators, and that only applies to the Martial Artists.'

The last part didn't concern me very much, but if I had to fight without external aid, something I had focused on for the past two months, then I was at a major disadvantage.

"Still..."

A smile formed on my face, undaunted by the rules that shone before me. It mattered not how the competition would go. As long as I won, that was the most important thing!

"Now, then... first off, we'll start with something known as 'culling'." The Moderator, Klaus Tallman announced— causing all of us to return our attention to him.

A dreadful silence enveloped the arena instantly. Whatever the man meant by 'the culling' truly grabbed everyone by the throat.

No longer did I see any excited expressions from our seniors who knew what the term meant. Only a grim look remained on their faces.

"The Inter-School Exchange aims to bring the best of each Class to clash in an all-out competition. While there is no discrimination on who can or can not participate, there are standards we maintain."

I slowly began to understand what the moderator was insinuating.

"In essence, to make sure none of our time is wasted, we will be cutting off the excesses and only taking in the best of each Class! Out of those who have decided to participate in the competition... only seven from each class will be allowed to proceed!"

My eyes bulged in response to the verdict.

'Seven? Already?!'

Noises of protests came from the mouth of everyone. There was no way the students wouldn't be dissatisfied with Klaus' words.

Our class alone had 38 members, and the first years were a total of 130! Yet, Klaus was saying only 21 Students would be making it out of the culling!

Granted, not all students would wish to participate in the Inter-Class Exchange, but as first-years who had no idea how the competition worked, I was certain a majority of us would join.

'Wow, intense right off the bat.'

My eyes slowly moved in the direction of Edward and Anabelle, seeing how they trembled in response to the news. I had no way of knowing if it was a result of excitement or nervousness. I certainly hoped it wouldn't be the latter, though.

"Now, then... as for the means of elimination, we'll be choosing the fastest way possible—a Battle Royale!"

Yet another protest from the crowd emerged.

For a coordinated competition to resort to this meant they were truly trying to get rid of the dead weight quickly. To conserve time, this was truly the most efficient means.

A game without rules, where a bunch of people was placed in a ring and the last man was left standing... that was what we were in for!

"Out of the seven, in order to make all things even, we will be selecting five Magic-Users, one Martial Artist, and one Scholar! Also, for fairness, the Battle Royale for each department will be held differently and the criteria for victory also differ."

So far, that sounded fair. I couldn't imagine a Scholar competing with a Magic-User for the top spot. Also, since Magic-Users were the majority among Ainzlark Academy's students, it was certainly reasonable that they would hold the highest number of candidates for qualification.

"Now, then, for this Battle Royale, we will be starting with the Third-year students!" Klaus dropped another bombshell.

However, this time, there was silence.

"The First Years are inexperienced in their competition, so we would appreciate it if our Third years gave a demonstration so they know what to expect!"

'I see... so, to introduce us to how fierce the competition will be, they're going to be showing us Ainzlark's final year students.' I smiled, nodding at the smart choice that was made.

Of course, these third years excluded those who were members of the Elite Ten. None of the Elite students were allowed to compete until the final day of the contest. This also promoted fairness.

"I shall now call upon the participants from the Third Years!"

Despair and terror were written on the face of the students as they watched the horrid, unbelievable sight.

I would know since I was also there to witness it!

Students pitted against students, no holds barred. The idea that the Inter-School Exchange was a fun game instantly evaporated from my thoughts, as well as that of others. Yes, this wasn't a game, not in the slightest.

Wounds—severe ones—were inflicted on desperate students, by other students. I had no idea why they would go so far for a contest, but they did.

Bursts of flames and chills of eyes were seen from our seats as the number of fighting students dwindled. From a few dozen, to a score, to a dozen... until, finally, seven remained.

These seven were nearly out of breath, but their eyes remained resolute. There was no doubt about it.

They were the champions of that round!

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Chapter 145: Battle Royale (Pt 2)

We witnessed our seniors duke it out, in silence.

No one among the audience spoke, no, we were too fixated on the match that was unfolding. By the time it was over, the heavy strained breaths of everyone seemed to let loose—heaves of relief spread across the hall.

Finally, the horrid match of desperation was over.

Unfortunately, this was only one of the several matches that would unfold—

Three Classes

Three Years

Three Departments.

While the nature of each Battle Royale would be different, we would have to watch, waiting our turn, as classmates destroyed one another for the right to remain in the fold.

Why did they try so hard? It was only a competition, after all...

Of course, the answer was obvious—Apprenticeship.

If they made an indelible impression on the Lecturers who were scattered about, these students would be able to be personally taught by them. It was a desperate strategy, but the returns made it all worth it.

Even I had to impress Neron to be taken in as his disciple!

"Alright, First Years! For the Magic-Users, you should have now understood how the Battle Royale works. Next, let us invite the Third Year Lower Class Martial Arts department, for their round." Klaus Tallman boomed, driving everyone who was in shock back into reality.

I gave a wry smile and realized that they were using the Lower Class seniors as scapegoats to start the competition. I wasn't too surprised by this fact, yet why did I feel disgusted?

'The prejudice even trails to this contest, uh? It'll be hard to gain first place, then...'

The Third Years stepped onto the stage—those who required weapons for their various fields got to pick from a shelf provided for them before they climbed the platform for battle.

I saw numerous weapons stocked on the shelf; swords, daggers, spears, etc.

They were all coated in a black hue, most likely made of iron or strong wood. Still, sharply observing the tools to be used by focusing my eyes on them, I confirmed that they possessed full edges.

I assumed it was to ensure none of the Martial Arts students received fatal injuries. After all, unlike Magic, Martial Arts were centrally focused on violence and deprivation of life.

If proper care wasn't taken, the Battle Royale was going to turn into a bloodbath!

"Now, then, are you students ready?" Klaus' voice boomed.

I watched the resolute faces of my seniors. They nodded and wielded their weapons respectively, though one decided to use his bare fists.

They were ten in number, a higher figure compared to the seven Martial Artists we had in our class. I was curious to see who would emerge victorious in this round.

"Begin!"

Immediately Klaus said this, he excused himself from the stage since he already stood at the edge. The students responded by rushing at each other, baring their fangs as they struggled to emerge victorious.

Some would have most likely been friends, but none of that mattered on the battlefield. With my heightened vision, I saw the swing of the sword clash with the tip of the spear. Sparks flew upon each impact, assuring me that this wasn't wood, but metal.

The clangs could be heard loudly thanks to the silence generated by everyone gathered.

For some time, the ten were at a stalemate, unable to completely overpower one another. However, that all changed the moment they all began a most surprising tactic—'Ganging up!'

Yes, all of the ten—save one— joined forces and decided to root out the most troublesome among them, the wielder of the spear.

Having enough reach to strike enemies at a distance, enough length to defend himself from all angles, and the versatility of piercing and slashing, any user of the spear was feared for the well-balanced attribute of their weapon.

Realizing this, they caught the student in a pincer, surrounding him on all ends. Had he been a master, he would have been able to properly adapt to the situation—unfortunately, the spear wielder was just a little more skilled than the others. With nine of them all focusing their attention on him, he stood no chance!

His face screamed of shock, flustered by the betrayal of those whom he must have expected to stick to a fair fight. Still, the senior clenched his hands on his spear, refusing to give in to the pressure.

Even though he must have known that his loss was assured, he didn't back down. Sweat dripped from his face and I followed his gaze as it traveled all around him. Somehow, I felt connected with him and vowed to see his struggle until the bitter end.

The boy smiled, causing my heart to thump heavily. I smiled in anticipation, cheering him on silently from where I sat. Every other voice, made by the crowd, was lost to me. The battle took all of my attention.

"Rahhhhh!!!" The spear wielder screamed as he swung his weapon with power, blocking off two attacks on his right flank, unfortunately, this gave room for the others to advance.

Quickly twisting his body to match their tempo, he sharply turned to deal another strike at the enemies that had advanced, but they were still too much to handle alone. Slowly, yet steadily, they closed their distance, until the reach of his weapon was rendered useless and defeat came crashing down on him.

He lost terribly, stabbed on all ends by the full blades of his former allies.

My heart bled at the sight for some reason. In my past life, I had seen more dangerous battles and had watched better valiant men fall. Yet, even though the boy wasn't dead, neither was he half as skilled as those valiant men, I couldn't help but respect him.

"You fought well..." My voice trailed.

I suddenly heard a sniff beside me. Turning my head in its direction, I caught Edward making teary eyes as he too watched the battle.

"That man... has my respect!" The young Martial Artist said, more tears streaming down his cheeks.

While I wasn't a dedicated Martial Artist, I had to agree with Edward's words. Truly, the spear master did his best!

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Chapter 146: Battle Royale (Pt 3)

My eyes went back to the stage and I saw yet another peculiar sight. The nine who formed a joint front to gang up against one had split yet again!

Eight against one—they used the same tactics to root out the most troublesome in order to ensure the victory of the collective. I sighed in disappointment, realizing that this cycle was sure to repeat itself even after this round was over.

'I wonder how long this will go on...'

"Aaaand, we have our representative for the Martial Arts department of the Third-year Lower Class!" Klaus Tallman returned to the stage, stretching his hands in the direction of the last student standing.

'Urgh, I knew it!' I rolled my eyes in disgust.

The one who became the winner was the Martial Arts that did not use any weapon—the bare-fisted fighter.

I had initially picked him for a brawler or monk who was more focused on strength, but surprise assailed me once the battle reached its final stages and the boy displayed an immense amount of speed and stamina instead.

Since the students kept picking on each other one after the other until three were left, the three realized that no matter what happened, it was every man for himself.

They decided to go on an all-out brawl since no one could be trusted anymore. The bare-fisted student survived through the use of his fast movements and immense flexibility.

None of the others could lay a finger on him, and anytime they decided to focus on fighting among each other, he would strike! They attempted to form an alliance to take him down, but he was too nimble for their exhausted selves to catch up to, plus their poor teamwork caused their downfall.

In the end, he utilized the weapons of the fallen challengers of the royale—which wasn't against the rules— and struck them when they least expected it.

It was a bold, smart strategy. I had to admit that the student's wits were impressive, clawing his way into victory, but I was still disappointed.

'This Battle Royale is supposed to pick out the strongest in each department and make them compete against those from the other classes. Don't they get it?'

By ganging up on the strongest and using the process of elimination, the ones who were left standing were weaker. That meant that the winner of this Battle Royale, while being smarter than the others, was much weaker than the first to lose.

'Cheap tricks won't work against the opponents of the other two classes! Don't they realize that?'

Ultimately, that Martial Artist of the Lower Class among the Third Years would lose in a fight with the others... that much was guaranteed!

They only achieved temporary victory—loss was inevitable!

For the Scholarship match, it was the least desirable and most boring for everyone—that was certain!

A question was posed to the Scholars competing, and each student was given a board where they had to write their answers.

The question revolved around the formulation of a quick theory in response to a problem addressed. The one who first resolved the issue correctly would be given the mantle of victory.

Of course, it wasn't a simple thing. Since it was a race against time, the temptation of rushing would appear. A single mistake would cost the competitor everything. Even when one decided to be slow and careful, if others were faster and managed to profer the tight theory on time, it would still end in a loss.

This competition was about balancing speed with ability. My eyes observed the judges who looked at the student's board with careful precision. They were already judging based on their answers, as was I.

Of course, for Scholars of high Caliber, or expert Magic-Users, it would be easy to spot the one with the highest probability of victory.

And, just as I expected... the victor came out victorious. The moment her name was announced, the glasses-wearing girl jumped up in victory to display her uncontrollable excitement.

"That's all for the Third Year Lower Class. I certainly hope all the First Years learned a lot from their presentation, because you're up next!"

"WHAAAATTTTT?!"

Shouts of disbelief radiated from the location of us First Years. They must have been certain that the tournament would continue with the Third Year Middle Class or something, then in the descending order, it would reach our turn. Now that the moderator had said this, certainly everyone's hearts were in a panic.

"The Third-year students only went first to serve as a demonstration for you newbies, but now that you've seen how it goes, we'll use the normal order," Klaus explained.

I sensed nervousness all around, but none of it affected me.

My eyes darted to my right, transversing where the Middle-Class students were seated, and going beyond that—I caught the sight of Stefan and Maria grinning in excitement. The time for the Royale was upon us at last and we would finally be able to see our respective skills.

Stefan looked in my direction and gave an arrogant smirk. His face was calm and relaxed, most likely because he knew we Lower Class students were the first to be called.

I caught the sight behind him and Maria, noticing the stranger once again. He had a soft smile plastered on his face, but I could read his emotions at all.

The golden color of his hair shrouded a great deal of his face, even covering one of his eyes like a layer. He had a ponytail that lightly hung on his head, and the golden hair atop his head had hints of orange at the tip.

There was no way I would have missed such a guy at our exam ceremony if he was indeed there. He had to be some sort of transfer student.

'He's smiling too, uh? I guess he's also excited. I'll be seeing him in action too, so it's fine.' My mind trailed as I retracted my attention to the stage—Klaus was about to call us down, after all.

"Now, then..." Klaus spoke, having a hint of dark foreboding in the wide smile he gave.

"... Let us begin!"

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Chapter 147: Qualifying (Pt 1)

"First off, the Third Year Lower Class... Magic-Users!" Klaus Tallman declared.

The hall fell silent and I saw all eyes shift in our direction. Seniors and fellow first-years alike all had their attention on our side of the colosseum, driving a lot of students around me to be on edge.

"Huu... guess it's time." I smiled, turning to Ana who was also staring at me.

We both gave ourselves anticipatory nods and arose from our seats. The other Magic-Users did the same, and we made our way down to the stage.

Magic-Users in the Lower Class amounted to eleven students in total—adding Anabelle to the mix, that made a sum of twelve.

I looked around me and saw eleven students, excluding me. That meant everyone had decided to participate in the Exchange... as expected.

"Now, as you have seen in the other fights, you just have to battle one another until only five of you are left standing." Klaus retorted.

Everyone nodded in response.

"Okay then..." The moderator went to the edge of the stage, raising his hand to signal commencement.

"Begin!"

As soon as he gave the signal to start, all ten students, excluding Ana and myself huddled together and stood opposite us. The fiendish smile on their faces told me they had ulterior motives.

"Hmmm?"

Each of them began infusing their Mana, all focusing their attention on us.

"Just as we said, everyone! Let's take them out first!" The one who appeared to be the leader said, grinning the widest.

'So this was your stupid plan, after all... how underwhelming.'

Our classmates were utilizing the method they had seen our seniors use—the weak ganging up on the strong. It was disappointing how their mind worked, but I couldn't exactly blame them. Still, their desperation to win was going to be their downfall.

'The matches we'll be having after the Battle Royale will most likely be one-on-one. Ganging up won't be possible. If they manage to qualify now, they'll lose miserably later on.'

I kept my thoughts to myself and looked at Anabelle.

She was brimming with confidence, raring to show the audience exactly what she was capable of.

"Do you want to do the honors, or me?" I smiled at her.

The excitement in the young girl's eyes only seemed to ignore more upon hearing my words.

"You always get to have all the fun... it's my turn now!"

Once she said this, I decided to leave it to her and enjoy the show. Of course, since only five were supposed to qualify, I expected her to only take out the necessary number of students, leaving three standing so they could serve as fillers.

With my focus diverted from the group in front of us that had nearly concluded their joint casting, I noticed sounds from the audience, specifically our side of the hall.

"H-hold on, that girl... isn't she a Scholar?"

"Why did she register for the Magic aspect of the Exchange?"

"She hangs out with Jared. Maybe she hopes to ride his coattails and come out of the match in one piece thanks to him!"

"Oh? Smart girl! That guy, Edward should have done the same. Hahaha"

"No way! He's too honorable. He won't do whatever it takes to win."

"Let's watch the show and see how Jared saves the damsel in distress. Hehehehe!"

Hearing their comments nearly made me laugh out loud. These ignorant fools had so many things wrong in their statements.

First of all, Anabelle certainly wasn't hoping to rely on me for anything. Secondly, Edward, while being honorable, was probably more intent on winning this Exchange than I. He would do whatever it took to emerge victorious... and that was the result of his hard work. Finally, there was no damsel in distress in this situation.

All those who underestimated Ana would soon see... just how formidable a tiny little girl could be!

"[Joint Magic: Spiral Flame Burst]" The students all chanted and raised their voices in response to the completion of their spell.

Instantly, the intermediate-level Magic Spell appeared, circling about them in form of blazing-hot flames. The circle curved and formed a spiral, now directed at us. Like a vortex ready to consume us, it spun and approached rapidly.

Since it was an intermediate spell—albeit a low-tier one, it was bound to cause severe or even fatal injuries if we didn't have any defense activated.

This was all of them using teamwork to decimate their foes. It was quite disappointing.

"Ana..."

"I know!" The girl cut me short, raising one of her hands, and chanted silently.

"[Spiral Wind Burst]"

Immediately, the intermediate-level Spell, similar to the one the enemy cast manifested. However, unlike the fast-approaching tendrils of flames, the pressure of the wind was far superior. Ana had poured more Mana and elevated the spell's status above the joint effort of the opposing students.

I could hear surprised gasps from everyone, but I contained my excitement. Ana was finally going to show everyone how awesome she was. Judging by the properties of both spells, she would come out victorious—blowing everyone in her path away.

'H-hold on... blowing everyone away?' My eyes bulged as soon as I realized the implication of her actions.

"A-Ana, hold on—"

Before I could complete my sentence, though, the burst of wind was released, shooting out like a vortex to clash with the flames a distance from us.

>WHIOOOOSSHHH<

I felt every hair on my body stand as the chill made me cover my face and peek from the openings to see the outcome of the battle.

Suddenly, the cool embrace of the departing wind turned hot as the vortex approached the flames. My skin tingled in reaction to the heat, causing me to wince a bit.

"UARGHHHHHHH!!!" The screams of our opponents filled the air.

I watched them try to create a defensive barrier, but none could individually produce a spell to counter two Intermediate-Level Spells clashing.

It was too late to try 'Joint Casting', so all they could do was scream in fear and pain as the terrifying bursts exploded.

>BOOOOOOMMMMM!!!<

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Chapter 148: Qualifying (Pt 2)

>BOOOOOOMMMMM!!!<

The blast echoed across the arena, sending bursts of heat spreading at a rapid rate.

The wind Ana conjured fanned the flames of our adversaries, causing a massive explosion to appear.

Thanks to her exert control of Mana and the superior nature of her spell, the eruption was sent to the side of the enemy and we suffered no harm, save for the heat that seeped into our skin.

While it was a good outcome, decimating our opponents, there was one problem...

"Ana, you were supposed to leave three still standing!" I protested, seeing all the students already on the floor with several burn marks on their bodies.

My voice became unintentionally loud since I was in a panic. It was uncertain what would happen if only two survived the Battle Royale, but I somehow had a feeling about what the verdict would be.

Now that we were the only two left standing, Ana and I had to brace for the worst.

"Well, well, well... looks like something unprecedented has occurred. Two, instead of five winners have emerged from the Lower Class Magic-Users of the First Years." Klaus remarked, smiling gleefully.

Ana and I got off the stage and returned to our seats, hearing as Klaus addressed our blunder.

"As a result, the judges will use their discretion in reaching a conclusion on the matter. Up to you, seniors!"

The moderator now left the decision to the judges. I was still on the way to my seat when I noticed the attention placed on Ana and me—it was different from the other eyes of the students that watched us with surprise.

This particular presence came from the elevated platform of the judges. I looked at them, halting, and waited to hear what they would say.

"Well, since they have clearly shown their superior use of power in this round, it's only fair that they have enough raw ability and proficient use of skill to qualify." Legris Damien remarked, smiling.

Of course, that would be his stance.

"The problem is how to add up the three remaining students who are supposed to make up the five..."
The one whose name I didn't know spoke.

Finally, Damien Lawcroft's lips curled up in a smile and he opened his mouth to remark. I concluded that from his malevolent expression, it couldn't be anything good.

"Why don't the two of them represent their class? They have clearly proven themselves to be good enough. So, instead of five students from the Lower Class Magic Division, those two will challenge the others. How does that sound?"

The moment he said this, the whole body of students within the hall gasped. I gave Damien a dirty look which he took in stride.

'This guy... he really wants to pull this move?'

The implications of his suggestion simply meant that even if five students passed from the Middle Class and Upper Class, just me and Ana would be responsible for handling all of them. We would take on the responsibilities of the three missing on our end.

"Hmm. That doesn't sound so bad. They do seem skillful enough. I accept." Legris smiled in support.

My jaw nearly dropped in surprise.

'You would betray me, Professor Legris?' I screamed internally.

The final judge also nodded in concession, sealing the deal between the three of them.

The moderator turned in my direction and grinned energetically. Upon hearing their verdict, it was his duty to announce it.

"The judges have made their decision! Jared Leonard and Anabelle Frederick will be representing their division in the upcoming matches!"

"Tsk" I clicked my tongue and resumed climbing the flight of stairs in order to reach my seat.

"I-I'm sorry, Jared. It's my fault for overdoing it..." Anabelle's soft voice came to me in a whisper.

I slowly turned to my sight and witnessed the guilty expression she wore on her face. Well, it was clearly her fault that we were now stuck in our current mess, but I had no right to blame her?

She was excited about manifesting what she had gone through so much to practice. Plus, I simply assumed that she had enough common sense to spare three students. From that start, I should have warned her, or saved three students with my own power.

"It's fine. Besides, this doesn't change anything..." I smiled at the girl, rubbing my hand on her hair.

It was only possible since she was quite short. The look of embarrassment she had as she blushed in response to my gesture made it all worth it.

Everyone around us witnessed what I did, giving her even greater mortification.

'Consider this your punishment!' I grinned gleefully.

"... This just means we'll be fighting in more matches than we had initially planned. But, so what? We're still going to win every single one!"

My tone of confidence seemed to do the trick as Ana slowly got over her guilt, and the expression on her face changed.

"Yeah. You're right!" She nodded with a determined smile.

With that resolved, we returned to our seats, only to see Edward rising from his. Our eyes connected, and I realized that it was his turn to go to the arena.

"Show 'em what you've got!" I grinned the moment our paths crossed.

"I don't think they'll be able to handle it all." He nodded and returned the gesture of a smile.

Edward wasn't conceited or overconfident. He was simply stating facts. After tempering his body and technique, Neither I nor Ana had any doubt regarding his skills.

"I'll be rooting for you, Ed!"

"Yeah! Watch me, guys."

With our conversation concluded, Ana and I headed to our seats while Edward descended to the stage.

Once I sat and watched from our position, my eyes caught six Martial Artists, Edward included.

"Looks like one decided not to participate... how rare."

Well, it did not matter.

Having a blade in his hand, Edward gave a fierce gaze that reeked of battle. The other five all had respective weapons—from the spear to the staff, even stilettos.

The battle hadn't even started, yet all the contestants already had their eyes on Edward, and not in a good way. Just as how Ana and I were targeted, it would seem he was also going to experience the same.

Unfortunately for those who dared to challenge him, Edward was very strong.

'Only one is meant to be left standing, and that is clearly going to be him!'

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Chapter 149: The Martial God (Pt 1)

[2 Months Ago]

Edward and I decided to meet up after he revealed his family's Martial Arts heirloom to me.

I was certainly curious about what his predecessors deemed worthy to be passed down, but I certainly wasn't expecting very much.

The Martial Arts of the modern era had dwindled as compared to the past, so my knowledge—though incomplete—was far better than any Martial Arts I found around.

'I don't want to let him down, especially after he opened up concerning this supposed secret...'

Even if it would be an underwhelming experience, I was determined to critically examine Edward's inheritance... at least the basic foundation of it.

And I did...

It betrayed all my expectations!

"T-this is—!!!" I exclaimed, feasting my eyes on the Martial scroll Edward handed over to me.

Anabelle was also present, but she kept silent in matters like this because she knew nothing about Martial Arts.

Regardless, both of them appeared stunned by my overwhelming reaction to the document I held in my hands.

"What is the matter?"

"I've never seen you so surprised before!"

Both of them asked at nearly the same time, displaying concerned expressions. I was a bit too overwhelmed to speak so I returned my gaze to the scroll and read it once more.

My heart rate increased once again and I controlled every excited muscle within my body from erupting in another shocking display.

"Edward, what did you say your family is? What lineage do you come from?" I asked after finally soothing my nerves.

Edward appeared taken aback by my question, but he must have concluded that I was dead serious considering the grave expression on my face.

"W-well, I'm not sure. We come from a long line of Martial Artists—that's all I know. Before he passed, my father told me our ancestor was a hero who was revered as the greatest in the way of the blade. He also said I would come to the realization of the truth if I reached a certain stage in the Martial Arts we practiced."

Edward seemed conflicted as he spoke. His eyes didn't even rise to look at me and he kept staring hard at the ground as though something was written there.

"I... I want to prove the art of the Blade is superior to all others and I want to reignite my family's legacy, ensuring Martial Arts take their place back in the world!"

This time he finally raised his head and looked at me with tears in his eyes.

The emotional display he gave made me even more certain... there was more Edward wasn't telling me. Still, I was satisfied with the little he shared. It meant a great deal to both of us.

Moving closer to the boy who still trembled in overflowing emotion, I grabbed him by the shoulder and gave a slight, yet firm pat. The moment I did this, he raised his head once again and stared straight into my eyes.

His brown pupils showed no sign of evil, just pure resolve. He had worked himself so hard to restore a dignity he wasn't even certain existed. The honor of a Martial Artist certainly flowed in his veins... and now I knew why.

"Edward, this Foundational Martial Art you have shown me... is the best I have ever seen!"

The moment I said this, Anabelle and Edward both jerked in surprise, taking a few steps back as though hit by the brunt of my words.

"W-what do you mean?"

"Jared, what are you—?!"

I raised one of my fingers to stop them from saying any more. It was certain I would need to explain some things.

"There are nine forms in this '9 Fundamental Precepts' technique. Each form has a peculiar kind of motion and they have combinations used. The most important is that the motion of the technique determines the result of the blade once the move has been established."

All nine forms produced different results than just slashing. The First Form, 'Rend' tore apart the target thanks to the focus on speed and a brutal strike. The other forms also had their specialties. In essence, this was a foundation that sought balance in sword mastery!

I had never seen anything like this before. It made me wonder what kind of techniques were embedded in the other scrolls he had. If the foundation was this good, then...

"Edward, it's no surprise that you couldn't master these techniques on your own. They are too profound."

The boy was struck dumb, just staring in shock at my words.

"I will be honest with you. If this technique is what qualifies as a fundamental one in your Martial Arts inheritance, then the advanced ones will be greater than My Martial Arts I know!"

More surprise filled the air.

'I wonder why he even bothered learning the other mediocre arts when a treasure trove was right in front of him...'

Well, I couldn't blame him. Edward couldn't fully grasp the techniques so he must have sought to learn from other Schools to broaden his knowledge and cover his weaknesses.

But...

"Edward, from now on, I forbid you from learning and practicing any other Martial Arts but your own."

It would simply be a waste of time engaging in something subpar to his inheritance.

"J-Jared... is this really true? My family's Martial Art... is it that great?" His eyes beamed like a child's and what I sensed to be a lost glint of pride and hope began manifesting.

'Well, judging by the foundation... and the limitless possibilities that exist beyond this, then...'

"Your family's Martial Arts is the greatest I have ever seen. Edward, I will teach you the flow and use my superior knowledge to help you in mastering it. But, it will be in exchange for something."

Nothing was free in this world, and I already made it known to Edward that I was going to require compensation for my help even before I began helping him.

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Chapter 150: The Martial God (Pt 2)

"No problem! You can ask me whatever—so long as it is in my power, I will do my best to comply!" The boy answered with zero hesitation.

This caused a smile to form on my face.

Making a fist on one hand and a flat palm on the other, I jammed both together and bowed to Edward. My face tightened, and all sense of playfulness left. This was a time of reverence and absolute respect.

"Edward, for you to have been bestowed this inheritance, that could only mean you are now considered the successor of your family's legacy. As a result, I now stand before the head of this amazing Martial Arts School."

Both my comrades looked dazed by my sudden action. I wasn't known for my humility, even if I was calm. A noble bowing before one considered a commoner was unheard of. Plus, it was clear to everyone who the inferior one was among the both of us—in all aspects! Yet, my head was hung low and my tone of reverence persisted.

"Edward, I ask... what is the name of your family's legacy—your Martial Arts School?"

For a moment, there was silence.

The three of us stood, transfixed on our positions—like statues. It was uncomfortable, but I endured it and waited for a response.

"It is called 'The Martial Blade God School'..." He finally spoke.

The moment I heard its name, I had gotten the last piece of information I needed. A faint memory fell upon me as I remembered a word Gawain, the one known as the Sword God of the Eastern Empire, said one too many times.

~The real Martial God is not me... but 'him'. If you ever encounter someone from the Martial Blade God School, know this! They are far better than I am!~

My grin widened even further. It was no wonder I was mesmerized by the Arts. It was the very same School that my close friend, Gawain, professed to be the strongest. With the successor of such techniques in front of me, I wasn't going to waste this chance.

"Jared, will you stop bowing now? T-this is a little awkward..." Edward muttered in confusion, most likely feeling embarrassed by my grand gesture.

"Y-yeah, Jared. You're making us feel weird." Anabelle added, even though she had nothing to do with this.

Still, I wasn't done. There was one thing I had to do, as someone who practiced an inferior Martial Art and wanted to increase my capacity!

"I ask of you, Edward Karl Leon... please accept me into your Martial School! Make me a disciple of your Martial Arts, so I can also learn. That is my request!"

Yet another gasp of shock excepted the moths of both my companions.

Edward was the successor of his clan's Martial techniques. Certainly, he knew of the implications. He had the power to appoint disciples to pass down his techniques.

Also, a non-disciple would not be allowed to practice his family's inheritance—a treasure meant to remain within the School.

That was why, even though I would be teaching Edward the method and patterns needed for him to master his family's arts, I couldn't learn it for myself... not unless I resorted to this!

My eyes went up and I looked at Edward, expecting his answer.

Once I did, my eyes met a smile on his face, no, a very large and optimistic grin.

"You're my friend, Jared! Plus, you also acknowledged my family's greatness and you're also willing to teach me how to fully utilize these techniques well! There's no way I could refuse you!"

Taking that as a 'yes', I raised my head completely and broke my pose.

Now smiling at Edward, I had mixed feelings. As much as I was grateful and incredibly joyous about the fact that I would be practicing such profound techniques, I also felt pity for the boy.

'He probably still has no idea how amazing his Martial Arts techniques are. Even if I offer to do those things for you, the value of what you're giving me is even more...'

There was no need to tell him that, though. Once he delved deeper into his Martial Arts School, he would see for himself.

But, by then, it would be too late. I would have already learned all I could from it—so, even if he wanted to revoke my access to his Arts, the knowledge would already be with me.

'I don't think he'll do that, though...'

Now grinning happily among one another, I kept my hands on both Anabelle and Edward's shoulders.

With the Inter-School Exchange two months away, I was going to build them into monsters among the other students. That would be my reward to them for being such sweethearts.

[The Present]

"Begin!" Klaus shouted.

The students that had all swarmed about Edward began their crafty approach, intending to completely obliterate their foe from all areas.

Unfortunately, they made the wrong choice!

Edward gave a light smile and reached for the blunt, metal sword that he hung on his waist.

Tightly gripping the weapon, he closed his eyes and focused his mana.

"Attack!!!"

"Break his concentration!"

"He can't do anything against our combined front!"

With their words hammering into the air, all five charged at Edward's single figure at the center. They were too late, though.

"9 Fundamental Precepts—Fifth Form: BREAK!"

Instantly, Edward swung his sword downward, no, he pierced it into the Arena ground, sending out a huge burst of mana mixed with an unimaginable pressure.

>BOOOOMMMMMM!!!<

An explosion instantly erupted, shaking the very foundations of the stage and sending shivers down the spine of everyone who watched.

Screams of students filled the air, the very students who charged at Edward and were assured of their guaranteed victory. The audience was a little dazed—confused about what exactly was happening.

However, once the smoke cleared, they saw it with their eyes... the state at which all the lone swordsman's enemies had been turned into.

The students were all on the ground, their disfigured bodies made it evident to everyone who watched that they must have had a forceful restructure down to their bones.

Even though the students were down, that wasn't the most surprising sight.

The moderator— and even the judges, all looked at the peculiar occurrence and were in awe of the young boy's exemplary display.

Throughout the Battle Royale of this season, none had achieved this great feat—

—The Arena ground... had shattered!