

SPELLCRAFT 61

Chapter 61 - The Academic Grounds

Legris vanished into thin air shortly after Desmond Lawcroft left.

The remaining two staff who had judged us in both first and third tests remained, though. Apparently, they were in charge of assigning us our dorms.

“Girls, come over here.” The woman said.

I smiled at her, remembering our little conversation. Her head bobbed and turned to my location. For a moment, our eyes met and a small smile appeared on her face for reasons unknown to me. She looked away sharply and began coordinating the girls who were heading toward her.

The man, as expected, called the boys to his side.

After we had all gathered, I sharply counted the girls in their row, estimating their numbers to be 34. As expected, there were more males than females among those who passed.

The man, who introduced himself as Klaus Tallman, guided us through a door and we obediently followed. From the corner of my eyes, I saw the girls being guided through another door, so I assumed we would be staying in separate dorms.

The area the door led to shone so brilliantly that I couldn't see a thing while drawing closer to it. I sensed mana surging from the severely bright sight, so I assumed it was some sort of teleportation magic that transferred us to our dorms.

I wasn't wrong!

As we all entered the door and passed through the light, we vanished from the usual plane we existed. Once it was my turn, I felt my body feel lighter than a feather, as though I was being carried somewhere beyond my control.

These feelings only lasted for a few moments, though, as before I knew it, I was somewhere entirely different. Opening my eyes, I was met with a wonderful new sight that sent shivers of excitement down my spine.

From all around me, I could hear 'wows' of awe. Everyone was amazed by the sight unfolding before us.

The Skies were so clear, that you could see the blues that were already turning orange due to the evening sun setting. The fresh wind that blew on my face made me remember my home, and the lush gardens that surrounded everywhere were equally pleasant. It seemed we appeared on grassy plains, surrounded by beautiful flowers and the likes, and from a short length, probably a little over a hundred meters, we could see the rest of the Academy. Tall buildings made from exquisite materials stood erect from a short distance, and many other facilities that seemed foreign to me could be seen all around.

“There's no time for sightseeing. You need to lodge into your dorms now.” Klaus Tallman said impatiently, guiding us away from the enchanting sight that had gotten all our attention.

Obediently, we turned to our guide and he instantly snapped his fingers.

That very moment, something appeared behind him. It looked like space was distorting as the tall structure came into sight.

It was a tall building! Large wasn't the right word to describe this structure. It was enormous, spreading so far that we had to turn our heads to see the end of it, raising our faces to see how high it went.

"This will be your temporary dorm until the final orientation where you'll have to split into different classes based on your abilities. You'll also come into contact with your seniors, so this is where you'll be staying in the meantime."

We all understood what he was saying. I also didn't expect to be placed in the same living quarters as those deemed 'talented'.

"Well, then... shall I show you to your respective rooms?"

We were 66 boys and the building had a hundred rooms at the very least, so we were all entitled to our private space.

As he showed us around the facilities, Klaus explained a few things to everyone. Firstly, the building had an effect that shielded it from the perception of ordinary eyes. That was why we hadn't noticed it until he snapped his fingers.

Secondly, we all had a schedule for the week we would be spending in orientation.

"Your rosters are placed on the beds in your respective rooms." He had stated

Our rooms didn't even need keys. Somehow, they had retrofitted it to match every single entrant.

'Does it have to do with the magic print we gave on our form?' I thought to myself.

Unfortunately, Klaus never addressed the issue, leaving this mystery unresolved.

It was exhausting, but I was finally shown my place of residence, albeit temporary.

"Haaa... Haaa...." I breathed hard, collapsing on the bed the moment I entered.

My entire body melted on the soft surface of the mattress and I could feel the exhaustion that I had been ignoring build up and begin evaporating.

"I've never exerted myself like this before..." I mumbled.

Of course, I didn't mean this concerning magic. It was more like mental and emotional exhaustion. Being around so many people, comporting myself in a way befitting someone of my status, as well as avoiding the several gazes of people around.

It was truly a tough task.

Fortunately, they all avoided me and didn't say a single word as we all trailed behind Klaus. My eyes caught Stefan giving me curious and competitive stares and I could tell that the brat wanted to talk to me, but he restrained himself.

'Well, it's a good thing he didn't... I've had enough interaction for today,...' My thoughts trailed.

My social battery had hit rock bottom and I seriously needed a recharge.

After closing my eyes for a few seconds to relax, I opened them and glanced around my room for the first time.

It was plain, but neatly designed. Having only the most basic of furniture such as a study table and desk, a wardrobe, the bed I slept on, and a counter by my side. The bathroom door was situated toward my far right and I guessed all basic necessities had already been provided for.

'That's good...' I heaved in relief.

The Academy had certainly gone through such great lengths to welcome us, but after this first week, not everyone would share the same treatment.

I had no idea where I would be going after this, but I could only brace myself for the worst.

"Ahh, enough thinking for now. Let's enjoy this while it lasts!"

Chapter 62 - Orientation

One week of 'Orientation' was given by Ainzlark Academy to make the new students properly integrated into the school system. After this one week was over, the new entrants would be indoctrinated into the school system and the academic system would commence in full force.

Of course, there were other reasons the orientation took one week... and that had to do with the new students.

Having instructors assigned to them for each day, they would engage in various activities such as exploring the school grounds, learning basic school rules, visiting facilities, etc.

In all honestly, the items on the schedules were quite a lot, but not too much to handle. If the Academy wanted to, they could have squeezed everything into a day. However, the reason for spreading it out was to leave more time for the students to have personal time for both themselves and one another.

Bonding, interaction, competition... these would go on to affect the lives of the students even after they had become fully integrated into Ainzlark.

And so, with no housemaster governing the large house, the students within were given free rein within. Whatever they did during their spare time was up to them, after all... there were no rules against it!

And so the days passed... finally bringing an end to the one week of orientation.

The scenery shifted from the building where the students stayed to a massive office situated at the tallest building in the entire Academy. It belonged to none other than the Academic Supervisor of the new batch of students, Damien Lawcroft.

He sat comfortably in his chair as he rummaged through some documents. However, those were just his hands at work. In reality, all his attention was on a single man who stood in front of him.

“Yes... Klaus... the orientation time frame ends today, right?” He asked the tall, lanky man who gave his usual wide smile.

Klaus nodded in affirmation.

“You’ve been monitoring the students with your magic, right? How have they progressed? Anything worthy of note?” Damien asked, narrowing his eyes.

Though he asked generally, he was actually truly concerned about a certain individual from the boy’s form which Klaus monitored.

After his just concluded conversation with Freya Leonhart, the woman in charge of monitoring the girls’ dorm. After she gave her report, he was a little disappointed that no real incident occurred among the girls.

It was most likely due to the overwhelming presence of Maria Helmsworth.

Usually, when people in competition were placed in a confined space with seemingly no supervision, it was only natural for some form of conflict to arise. However, the case would be different if an insurmountable existence existed in the very same confined space.

This existence would deter any form of conflict. Usually, this would be the supervisors or staff of Ainzlark, but they had been intentionally removed from the premises to give the students freedom to do whatever they liked.

However, this time, a single student took on the role of that existence. Maria Helmsworth.

“The girls had no incident occurring in their end, but I suppose in the end they are just girls... what about the boys? Any incident worth mentioning?” Damien asked once again, sensing a form of hesitation form on the face of the man who was reporting to him.

“Well, it was almost that way for the boys as well. While there was obviously deep tension in the air, no one acted on their emotions or behaved irrationally...” Klaus began.

Damien’s eyes instantly fell in disappointment. He had expected more, but it appeared this year’s students had no balls or knack for entertainment.

In a way, it could be considered that they were sensible enough to consider comporting themselves and not cause any trouble. But, it would be a problem if they were just weak-hearted and didn’t want any trouble at all.

What sort of mage would such a student turn out to be?!

“... But, just yesterday that all changed by an incident that caused quite the scene in the form!” Klaus completed his statement.

The moment he heard this, Damien’s eyes flipped as his relaxed body jumped in excitement.

“Oh? That’s interesting! What happened?”

“Well, it started as a little argument and it turned into a form of magic duel...” Klaus spoke with slight discomfort.

He wasn't too certain if he should go on, but upon meeting the excited eyes of Damien, he realized that it was foolish to consider skimming through the details.

His superior wanted details, and so he had to do what was expected of him.

"A magic duel, eh? Let me guess..." Damien filled in the silence with his words.

He knew boys were more hot-blooded, so his expectations had paid off and an incident had indeed occurred. He also had a hunch on who the fighters had to be.

The ones with inferior abilities were most likely going to shrink away from any form of trouble. However, those with considerable strength wouldn't run from a challenge.

"... The fighters were Stefan Netherlore and Ivan Smith. Correct?" Damien added.

Those two were the ones with the highest potential on the boys' side, scoring second and third positions respectively.

While he knew they were both dignified, the two were still kids. Plus, they had huge egos from being praised as geniuses since they were young. Not only that, but they both failed to achieve the top spot and lost to Maria, a girl.

No doubt their frustration was building up, ready to be unleashed by a slight provocation. Those two had every reason to duke it out.

The expression Klaus gave to Damien's assertion, though, showed that he was wrong.

"Well, the latter was one of the parties engaged in combat... but for the second party..." Klaus said, hesitating once again.

He really didn't like the idea of doing something as troublesome as this. Still, he brought himself to complete his sentence.

"It was Jared Leonard, the one who got 5th Place in the examinations."

This statement sent silence into the room. Klaus was right! Judging from the air that had changed around him, Damien was certainly not pleased about what he heard. He appeared disappointed, but another emotion could be seen planting itself across his face.

"And? Who won?" Damien asked, temporarily ignoring the elephant in the room.

Klaus swallowed hard. What he was about to say would cause even more trouble for him. But, he couldn't refuse the question, could he?

"The winner of the match... was Jared Leonard."

That little boy achieved an overwhelming victory!

Chapter 63 - How It Started

[A Day Ago]

The residence of the boys teemed with life as usual.

The barely teenage young lads talked with one another, exchanging stories and experiences excitedly. Whether it was about the fact that their Orientation would soon end, or what they had learned in the past couple of days, there was always something to serve as a subject of discourse.

Of course, not everyone was engaged in conversation. Two especially were left out of the talks. One chose not to even bother interacting with the rest of the boys. Perhaps as a feeling of superiority, he intentionally isolated himself from others, preferring to read the books he had borrowed from the library.

As for the other, he was simply left out of the conversations. No one bothered involving him, neither did they acknowledge his existence. This boy also passed his time by either reading the books he got from the Library or the one his tutor had given him as a gift.

Yep! The boy was me.

It had been a short couple of days since we arrived, and I had not made a single friend. Everyone ignored me. I caught the gazes of some who seemed like they were interested in talking to me, but they never made any effort to try.

In such a place where collectivity was the best course of action, no one wanted to defy the norm and break the unspoken rule of my ostracization. The fear that they would be abandoned by others and also be cast out coursed through everyone and they all pretended I didn't exist.

"Well... I don't really mind..." I mumbled.

Ainzlark gave us a lot of free time and only took up a few hours per day for our orientation. It felt strange to me since I was certain that we didn't need a week to complete this course.

'There's most likely another objective to this phase...' I reasoned.

I doubted it was the same as the other tests we had, but at the same time, wondered what the higher-ups were up to.

After exploring every nook and cranny of the apartment, apart from the rooms of everyone else, of course, I found well-hidden magic tools all around.

Of course, I took great caution not to get caught snooping, even in my room. Acting natural, I diligently uncovered the positions of these objects while others were having the time of their lives.

'I knew it! They're watching us!'

Well, there was nothing I could do even if they were, so I decided to keep to myself and avoid trouble. Unfortunately, trouble came looking for me.

... And that trouble came from a particular someone.

Spending my free time as usual, I read Alphonse's book and cross-referenced it with a few materials I was allowed to borrow from the library.

Even though the Academy provided for all our material needs and we weren't permitted to bring foreign objects, special exceptions could be requested.

I was able to retain my book, ring, and necklace, all mementos from those very important to me.

It was an interesting study, one that never seemed to end. However, after several hours of immersing myself in knowledge, I began to feel hungry.

I initially ignored it, but there's only so much one can take. Once I reached my limit, I decided to satiate my hunger and left my room.

Treading the sturdy flight of stairs, I descended slowly and carefully, already feeling tired from not having too much energy left.

'Why did I push myself...?' I groaned internally with regret.

Upon reaching the ground floor which took the form of a lounge, I proceeded to my left side where my meal was supposed to have been placed.

Out meals were brought at intervals; morning, afternoon, and night. They were properly packaged and special personnel brought them promptly. Since the food brought was according to our exact number, we all had our allocated portions without any need to worry about leftovers or deficits.

"... Uh...?" I muttered in surprise upon getting to the large table where all the food would have been kept.

Nothing was there!

'Oi, oi, oi! You're kidding, right?' My mind rang.

This was no laughing matter. I was hungry to the point of collapsing. I needed that meal!

An expression of disbelief showed clearly on my face as I stood, frozen. However, as I was still trying to figure out what had occurred, I heard tiny laughs and Snickers from behind.

"Kekeke..."

"Pfft..."

"Hihihi..."

Since my senses were always been sharpened by magic, I was able to pick up their unpleasant noises of amusement.

'Are they laughing at me?' An unpleasant feeling enveloped me the moment I considered a very plausible answer.

A small smile appeared on my face as I made a wild guess concerning what had happened to my food. Turning away from the table, I approached the group that sat in the lounge area.

It was the usual squad that dominated the boys' dorm. Since Stefan wanted nothing to do with anyone and simply locked himself in his room, only coming out for compulsory activities or meals, he wasn't the ringleader of the boys.

No, that title belonged to the one who scored third in our exams... Ivan Smith!

I made sure to keep a poker face as I approached the group who slowly stopped laughing once they noticed my advance.

“Good afternoon, or rather, evening, gentlemen.” I greeted, a basic form of courtesy.

“Hey, Ivan, did you hear about the Guardian Spirit of the Library?” Jerry, one of Ivan’s mobs, quickly brought up an irrelevant topic the moment I greeted them.

This displeased me, but I kept my cool. I wasn’t so childish that I would give such an obvious excuse for a snub any reaction.

“Do any of you-”

“Oh? I think I heard something about that.” Ivan interrupted me with an energetic response, intentionally smothering my words with his.

‘Ah, I see... so it’s them after all’ My thoughts rang.

I was so hungry that my belly bellowed at me. It was evening already, and I hadn’t had anything but an early breakfast. Due to how tired I was, there was an option of simply giving up my lunch and waiting for dinner. This way, I could avoid any conflict.

However, even in my state of weakness... there was no way I was going to let this go now.

‘These brats... I should do something.’

Chapter 64 - Pressure

“I’m trying to-”

“What do you think it looks like, the Spirit?” Yet another interruption came my way.

At this point, I could safely assume that they were trying to thwart my efforts at communication and most likely had something to do with my missing food since they were laughing just moments ago.

‘These young’uns...’ I smiled, deciding to try something I hadn’t done in a while.

HUMMMMMNNNN

A low hum suddenly filled that air as it became thick and heavy. The idiots who were trying to ignore me by engaging in idle chatter suddenly felt the change around them and instantly their expressions changed.

“Keukk!”

“Urk!”

“Garrghkkk!”

Their pointless talks ceased, and no longer did any of them have amused expressions on their faces. Choked by the pure brunt of something they could lay eyes on, these boys writhed, looking in confusion.

My grin widened further.

'How does it feel... to be under my Mana Pressure?'

"Urk... w-what is... this...??" Ivan, the ringleader muttered under strained breaths.

He seemed to be the only one who could handle it to a degree, a feat that was adequate for someone who scored third. It wasn't like I was being serious either.

If I was... these boys would have lost consciousness long ago, or worse-

'There's no need to go that far. I've achieved what I wanted.'

The boys all turned to me with both surprise and pain, their glares showing suspicion. No one else could be responsible for their sudden discomfort, after all.

Some made attempts to open their lips, but I increased the pressure, causing the fools to shut them instantly.

"Now that I have your attention, I'd like to ask you a single question," I spoke, followed by a sigh.

My smile vanished as I moved closer to the group of about nine boys, Ivan's inner circle. Pointing my fingers toward where my food ought to have been, I gave my question.

"My food on that table... what happened to it?"

The pressure caused them to give their guilt away. Sweat formed on their faces and I could hear strained breaths. However, none of them confessed.

'Ah, the pressure must have been too much...' I suddenly realized, deciding to retract it entirely.

WHUUUUSHHH

The intimidating air vanished, replaced by the usual calm of the room. However, unease was still amid the lounge.

"Answer me, please." I broke the silence courteously.

The eyes of everyone turned to Ivan, their leader. He had the final say on their response, and no one wanted to go out of line to speak. In the case that they said what they weren't supposed to, it would spell doom for them.

"W-what are you talking about?" He found himself stuttering as he spoke.

The effects of my pressure hadn't fully left his body.

"Why are you asking us? What's out business with you?" Ivan spat, trying to assert dominance.

Not a bad move... for a child, that is. The eyes of everyone had already given me my answer, so any excuse he thought of giving me was synonymous with a lie.

I could have chosen to leave things at that and returned to my room or even force him to give me the truth with Mana Pressure. However, I was too tired and hungry for that. There was no real need to stress myself since I was already certain the culprits were them.

“Ah, I see. It’s alright then...” I said, taking a few steps back as I made my way back to the stairs that led to my room.

A look of relief appeared on everyone’s face when I made my exit, causing me to smile within myself.

As soon as I got to the foot of the stairs, I turned back to the group who kept watching me, as though impatiently hoping I vanished.

“... I suppose I’ll have to raise this matter to our supervisor...” I muttered, making my voice loud enough for the boys to hear me.

Their eyes bulged the moment I said this, giving surprised stares. They glanced anxiously at each other’s now turning to Ivan to deal with the matter.

I didn’t bother waiting. Pushing my tired body along the stairs, I began climbing.

“Hey, why go that far? It’s just lunch! The superiors shouldn’t be bothered about something that trivial.” Ivan retorted, obviously referring to me.

‘You slipped up, Ivan!’ My mind rang in satisfaction as I once again turned to look back at him.

The same person who pretended not to care now sprang up and spoke the moment I mentioned a supervisor. That was an unwise move.

‘I suppose the aftereffects of experiencing a Mana Pressure is making them anxious...’

“What do you mean? Haven’t you read the rules of this apartment? Didn’t you pay attention during our orientation? Stealing within this Academy warrants severe punishment.”

It didn’t matter if it was a piece of paper, lunch, or a magic book. No matter the property taken, what was important was the act itself. In essence, whoever took my lunch was liable for that offense and would be punished accordingly.

“I don’t remember giving anyone permission to take my lunch, and the Academy isn’t sloppy enough to give us food with one person short. That means someone took my food.” I continued.

The boys looked more uneasy while sweating profusely. It was as though they were confessing their guilt by conduct alone.

“It’s a shame you guys didn’t see the culprit. I’m certain our supervisor should be able to find the perpetrator. We wouldn’t want anyone else to fall victim, now would we?” I smiled weakly.

I had said enough. There was no need to directly interfere with these guys. With the staff of the Academy watching, there was no telling if an act of violence would be to my demerit. On the plus side, since the supervisors could monitor us, it meant they had also seen the incident take place.

‘I don’t need to bother lifting a finger... the authorities will deal with this. That will be their punishment!’ I sighed, still feeling the tight twist in my stomach.

I felt so hungry... so tired! Once I got to my room, I was most likely going to lie down and wait for dinner.

“Hold on!” Ivan’s voice abruptly cut into my thoughts, but I ignored him.

He was just going to keep rambling, after all.

“I SAID, STOP!” He shouted, now in a tone of aggression.

I still didn’t have any intention to listen to him, however... something I felt caused me to change my mind.

Halting instantly, I took a look behind me and saw Ivan clad in his mana. He glared at me aggressively, having a determined glow in his eyes. I felt an unpleasant foreboding as the very thing I tried avoiding was practically begging for my response.

With a deep sigh, I fully turned in Ivan and his crew’s direction, asking the leader a simple question;

“What do you think you’re doing?”

Chapter 65 - How It Ended (Pt 1)

“What do you think you’re doing?”

My eyes narrowed, watching the fool manifest his mana.

“That’s what I’d like to ask you.” He said, now straining a smile.

“You’d really tattle on one of your roomies and cause them to suffer such a punishment just for lunch?”

His question sounded so stupid, like a sorry excuse for justification. I sighed and shook my head. I didn’t have the time or energy for this.

“It’s none of your business, is it? Since you’re not the culprits. Besides, didn’t you guys say you didn’t care?”

I made to turn away, but Ivan raised his hand and pointed it at me, glaring at me in a threatening manner.

“Oi. I’m trying to be polite here. It’s not nice to tattle on our fellow classmates.”

‘Fellow Classmates, eh? That’s quite a funny way to describe a bunch of people who totally alienated me.’

I would have loved to ignore Ivan and just return to my room, but the boy drew closer to me, donning a threatening look. It appeared he wasn’t going to let me return in peace as long as I intended to take the issue to the authorities.

“You should just let this one go... don’t you think so?” He smiled menacingly.

At this point, I had no idea if this was still the effects of my Mana Pressure, or if Ivan was just plain dumb. Why would he decide to choose this method?!

‘Well, if he was smart, he wouldn’t have chosen to take my lunch, to begin with.’ I rightly reasoned.

When dealing with such a person, maturity had to be suspended. I had to handle him as I would a child and rightly discipline him myself.

"I think I remember now... that lunch..." He muttered as he drew closer, displaying the mana that leaked from his body as a way to intimidate me.

"... It was evening already and no one came to get it. Instead of it spoiling, I decided to do the owner a favor and eat it."

How shameless. I didn't expect him to actually confess. He must have been confident in his ability to keep my mouth shut.

"I did the right thing, didn't I? It's not good to let food waste, don't you think?"

At this point, he was already at a close distance from me. Ivan placed one of his hands on my shoulder and gave a confident grin, like everything was going according to his plan since I was motionless.

He paused, waiting for my answer to his question. Ivan most likely wanted to indirectly coerce me into giving up and losing my resolve. Also, as one ostracized by everyone, it would only prove worse for me to report someone like him of theft.

'My reputation will take another nosedive and I'll probably garner a lot of animosity...'

Regardless, I had nothing much to lose. It wasn't like my reputation was solid, to begin with. It appeared Ivan had overestimated my regard for such paltry things.

"Well, I think... what you've said is nothing short of bullshit!"

My rude remark, coupled with the vulgar word mixed in gave everyone quite the shock, Ivan most of all.

His face morphed from an intimidating smile to a more aggressive and annoyed expression. He revealed his teeth in a growl. However, it seemed he hadn't given up on trying to 'convince' me.

"Hey, little shit..." Ivan drew his face closer to mine, moving to my ears as he whispered words into them.

"... If you know what's good for you, you'd better play along now that I'm being nice. I don't want to get rough with a fellow coursemate, after all."

I could feel his strained breath waft on my skin, it felt a little disgusting having someone this stupid so close to me.

His arms pressed in my shoulders, trying to get a feel of my bones to make me further understand the point he was making. Apparently, threats were all he was good for.

"Would you remove your hands from my shoulder? I'd like to relax in my room now." I replied.

He responded according to my wishes, thinking I had finally conceded to his 'deal'. Grinning energetically, he gave a short chuckle.

"Hehe, I knew you'd get it."

Ivan must have misunderstood my words, so I had to correct him.

"Get what? I need to save up my strength for when I report to the supervisor that you took my lunch. Since it was a benevolent act, I'm sure they would 'understand'."

That seemed to have pushed Ivan to the limit of his primitive brain. He growled in annoyance, and increased the tempo of his mana in an instant.

“Then I guess I’ll have to beat you to the point where you can’t speak!”

Tightening his hands into fists, he took a step back to build momentum for when he would strike me. I suspected he made himself slower on purpose since he wanted to give me room to change my mind. But, that wasn’t going to happen.

The boys behind Ivan were smirking at me, clearly hoping to enjoy a little beatdown. Well, they were going to see what they wanted, it was a shame I wasn’t going to be the one on the receiving end.

FWOOOOOSH

Ivan’s fist, enhanced by the mana coat he had on rushed at me. Judging from its trajectory, he was aiming for my cheek. Most likely going for a quick jab that would render my face swollen and a portion of my teeth shattered to the point that I would experience pain and learn not to speak a word of the perpetrator.

‘In this apartment... even though there are all sorts of rules... there’s no single one against fights!’

I found that strange, but because of this fact, people like Ivan could resort to measures like this to silence others.

I felt tempted to smile. After all, since all the conditions had been met, there was no need to hold myself back anymore.

WHAP!!!

Chapter 66 - How It Ended (Pt 2)

WHAP!!!

A loud slapping noise echoed across the ground floor, causing everyone in the lounge to drop their jaws in surprise.

The sight was quite unbelievable, a total opposite of what they were expecting. Ivan, the one who received a backhand slap from me, staggered back, feeling the sharp sting on his cheek as he winced.

As for his blow, I dodged it easily while responding with that slap. As a result, his assault didn’t work at all.

‘I wasn’t going to resort to violence since that would be immature...’

Plus, we were being watched, so there was a chance that violence would attract an unknown penalty. However, I had been patient enough to ensure there were unquestionable justifications for my action.

One, Ivan stole my lunch.

Two, he threatened me.

Three, he struck first.

Using these three factors as a basis, there was no way I could be shackled by the fear of any punishment.

In fact, I was well within my rights to attack. And attack I would!

‘Brace yourself, Ivan Smith...’

Ivan, after recoiling from the shocking hit I gave to his now reddened cheek glared at me with surprise and anger.

“You little shit! How dare you!” He burst out.

‘Um... what was I supposed to do? Let you hit me instead?’

The injured pride of Ivan began manifesting as he gave heavy breaths. His eyes bulged, nearly out of their sockets and I could tell he had most likely never gotten such treatment from anyone.

“Hey, brat! Apologize to Ivan!”

“What do you think you are?”

“It’s just lunch!”

The minions behind Ivan shouted at me, all eyeing me with animosity, totally different from the amused expressions from earlier.

“I’ll make you regret this!” He tightened his fist.

‘So he’s going for another hit, uh? I should take the initiative, then.’

WHOOOOSHH

In a flash, I vanished from where I stood and appeared before Ivan using high-speed movements.

“W-wha-?!”

Before he could react in shock after seeing about appear before him, I gave another backhand slap on his other cheek, causing his head to flail in the opposite direction.

WHAP!

“Gurgh!” He groaned in pain, staggering backward again.

‘What an embarrassment... he’s coating himself with mana and can’t even handle a normal hit from me...’ My thoughts trailed.

Ivan lunged at me in fury, trying to catch me off guard as I thought for a moment. The loud noise he made gave him away as I sharply looked up and dodged the powerful blow he launched.

The vibrating air caused by this mana shook my hair as they missed. I returned the favor by slapping him once again on his stinging cheeks, giving him two hits in succession.

WHAP!

WHAP!

I was too tired to actually fight this guy seriously. Even if I did, there was no point. He was too weak. My stomach was biting me seriously, but I endured. It would be over soon anyway.

“Argh!” He coughed, taking more staggering steps backward.

At this point, his back rested on the wall close to the door that led to the entrance of our apartment.

I stood a few meters from him, noticing his cheeks were already swollen to a nice degree. It made him appear to be a puffed animal, accentuating his roughish face.

“Ivan, come on. Teach this little shit a lesson.”

“He’s feeling cocky already, just because you’re going easy on him!”

“You little shit! Ivan’s gonna mess you up real good!”

From Ivan’s conflicted expression when hearing those words, I could tell that he was already taking this fight seriously. His pride was on the line, after all.

Suddenly, I began hearing hurried footsteps and whispers coming from all across the apartment. From the sound of things, many people were on their way here.

A broad grin nearly formed on my face, but I restricted myself. I wasn’t going to reveal anything.

It didn’t take long for Ivan, and the rest of his crew to notice... that everyone in their rooms had made their way to the stairs to see what was going on in the lounge.

“What’s this?!”

“Ivan is fighting with someone?!”

“H-hold on, isn’t that... Jared Leonard?!”

Hushed sounds and muffled comments permeated the room as a cluster of crowds watched from the stairs and tried to get a view of what was going on.

Since I was directly backing the stairs, none of them could really see my face, just my view from behind. As for Ivan, he had a swollen face and had already covered his body with mana.

Things weren’t looking good for him.

“Oj, oj, is Ivan actually going so far against Jared?”

“He’s even using mana! Isn’t that against the rules of this place?”

“What? No! Didn’t you check the regulations? There’s no mention of fights.”

“That means... we’ll actually get to see something interesting.”

“Who do you think will win?”

“Ivan, of course! The guy is a beast!”

“Didn’t you see Jared’s performance in the second test though?”

“Pfft, please. That must have been cheating. He’s only a white Core! Ivan is close to the peak of Yellow Core.”

They kept talking and arguing among themselves, unconsciously increasing the tempo of their voices.

“Look what you’ve caused, Ivan. All I wanted was my lunch.” I sighed, giving him a tired expression.

He growled at me, giving a more menacing look. The boy was well aware that he was to blame for all of this, but he had come too far to turn back now.

“You... I’ll teach you a lesson. You shouldn’t have defied me.”

Raising his hand, he loosened his fist. I was surprised since I expected more pointless swings and jabs from the moron.

“” He chanted.

Instantly, flames began appearing in his hand. The bright amber light sparked and burst forth, birthing a dancing ball of flames on his hand, as large as a person’s head.

Everyone gasped in surprise. Even I had to take a step back in surprise.

‘He’s going to use magic? Really?!’

“Hehehe...” His voice took a deep, darker undertone.

The expression he gave showed a hint of danger and I could tell he had reached a point where he saw me as simply an enemy that needed to be eliminated.

“You’ve brought this upon yourself, Jared...”

The flames flickered and seemed to grow bigger in size as he began advancing toward me.

“...Now burn!”

Chapter 67 - How It Ended (Pt 3)

“Burn!”

Ivan Smith declared, flames in hand— clearly ready to launch it at me with full force.

‘What the heck?!’

I hadn’t counted on things escalating to this extent. I had overestimated Ivan’s intelligence since I thought he would have thought things through.

‘Violence isn’t prohibited, but the destruction of property is!’

Judging by the intensity of the flames, even if I evaded it, it would destroy furniture and perhaps other things. While it would be considered Ivan’s attack, we would both be penalized since our fight caused it.

‘Damn... I don’t intend on being penalized this early!’

My stomach bit me, allowing me to remember the pain within me caused by lack of nutrition. This caused me to wince. Coupled with my already worried expression, I was certain I looked really pathetic.

“Looking scared already, eh? Well, it’s too late now!” Ivan grinned, bringing the flames closer.

I realized that he wanted to show off his power in front of everyone at this point. If he played his card right, people would view him as one who could easily bring anyone into subjection if they defied him.

This would increase his reputation and give him a better standing among students. Unfortunately, I had no intention of being his stepping stone.

‘It feels like a waste to use this on someone like you, but...’

As Ivan approached with his sparking flames, the brilliant burst of fire suddenly began flickering and in a second, died out entirely.

“... E-eh?!”

Everyone’s eyes widened as the flickering light went out, wondering what the heck happened. Still, none were as shocked as Ivan, who looked at his palm and found nothing but sizzling smoke.

“What the-?” I heard him whisper.

“What’s wrong? Weren’t you going to burn me up?” I smiled, enduring the pangs of hunger within me.

He frowned, feeling the weight of public opinion begin to shift from his side. Gritting his teeth, he attempted his spell again and a burst of fireball appeared, causing the smile had previously to return.

“Oh? Maybe he deactivated that other spell on purpose!”

“Yeah! is a middle-tier Basic Spell, after all. There’s no way Ivan would flop it!”

“He must be getting serious now!”

I smiled, hearing the fickle audience switch sides again. Ivan was pleased by the support of the crowd and took a bold step forward in response. However, just as he moved, his flames went out once again.

“W-wha-?!” His eyes widened, hearing the sizzling of dying flames in his palm.

Having experienced this twice in a row, the thought had registered in everyone’s mind that this was no fluke. And, just as expected, whispers began spreading.

“What’s going on?”

“Ivan can’t chant a fireball spell?”

“No way! You saw what he used in the second round!”

“Then... do you think it’s Jared that’s causing his spell to fail?”

“No way! is a high-class spell!”

“I’m so confused right now?”

My grin grew a bit wider as I saw Ivan getting crushed by the barely audible sounds coming from the audience. Of course, in his mana-enhanced state, Ivan could hear them too. Having no other option than to glare at me, the older boy growled in frustration.

“You... what did you do?!”

A wry smile appeared on my face. Even if I told him, he wouldn't get it!

‘In any case, I should end this quickly.’ My thought rang as I clenched my stomach.

Ivan desperately activated as soon as he saw that I was already making my advance toward him. This time, however, the flames only flickered for a second, not even growing behind a mere spark before dying out.

“Whu-?!”

He did it again, and this time nothing but sizzling smoke emanated from his palm. Puzzled beyond belief, his eyes went to his palm, and then to me.

“W-what are you doing?!” He cried, gritting his teeth.

I didn't bother responding, as I was conserving energy. My steps were slow but steady. In a few seconds, I would reach Ivan.

His leg began shifting back and I could feel his unease— the temptation to retreat was so evident in his eyes.

However, if he did so, everyone would get a worse impression of him. Realizing this, he stood firmly in his position and pointlessly tried casting, to no effect.

‘I'm guessing ‘Fire’ is his major attribute since he's in the Yellow Core Stage already. Other Spells would take a considerably longer time. That's why he's stubbornly clinging to it.’

Well, even if he used other spells, I had perfect counters for them.

Ivan began letting out shrieks as his Spell was not working at all, at least to all eyes that could see. Not even smoke came out again.

“Stop wasting your mana pointlessly... it won't work,” I spoke blankly, a couple of inches from the taller boy.

Ivan gritted his teeth and decided to forget his spell. At our current range, he had the appropriate reach to land a solid blow on me. With this in mind, he clenched his fist and launched a powerful blow at me.

My body was sluggish due to the weakness enveloping me, so I didn't want to do anything as troublesome as moving my body to dodge.

WHAM!

Ivan's fist stopped a few inches from my face, hitting an invisible wall that was so sturdy, it generated a massive noise in response to the opponent's hit.

In reflex, Ivan withdrew his hand in pain and let out a little groan. His hand was reddened, caused by the impact between him and my invisible defense.

His face showed fear and confusion as I took another step closer. The boy's legs were forced to move backward, retreating as I advanced. I remained unfazed and kept moving.

In response, his irrational self took over and launched volleys of mana-enhanced punches at me. My invisible barrier took the brunt of all his offenses and only Ivan suffered from all his attacks.

By the time his back reached the wall and he had nowhere else to retreat to, I had already one of raised my hands, struggling to keep it steady due to my weakened state.

An idea came to mind, so I decided to act on it.

‘Using it should be enough... with this, it’s my win...’

Chapter 68 - Jared's Overwhelming Victory

Pointing my index finger at a frightened Ivan, I moved my lips and let out little whispers.

My words manifested and took the form of a Spell. Invisible waves flew from my pointer and were sent to Ivan in a fraction of a moment.

“GUARKKKKKK!!!”

The target yelled out in pain, sending loud noise reverberating across the lounge, even the stairs.

People felt his pain from a distance, but I couldn’t care less. After a few seconds of screaming out, afflicted by something no one could see, Ivan collapsed.

THUD!

I made way for his body to fall to the ground, completely powerless to break the fall. Everyone could see from where they stood... Ivan had fallen unconscious.

After the little mishap, I gave a sharp glare to Ivan’s minions and went to my room. Those who occupied the stairs instantly parted ways and gave me more than enough room to transverse.

My eyes darted to Stefan. Apparently, he had been watching my fight with Ivan. Just as before, it seemed like he wanted to say something, but was hesitant about it.

‘Just be quiet, Stefan... I’m not in the mood!’ My mind snapped.

Walking past him, I went to my room and shut the door tightly. The moment I felt the familiar ambiance of known territory and knew no one was watching— except for those monitoring us, I fell to my bed and gave in to my weakness.

Sleep couldn’t come, since I was so hungry. However, I was allowed to enter a drowsy state. My thoughts trailed to the just-concluded fight with Ivan, and all I had done in such an irrelevant clash.

Firstly, from the moment Ivan decided to assault me, I activated sound amplification magic, making sure our commotion attracted a crowd. This was the major reason all the students came to witness our fight even though they would have just been occupied with Whatever activities they had planned for the day.

Since my body was constantly strengthened thanks to my multiple cores and a well-established system within me, I could easily react to Ivan in my hungry state. I could also injure him considerably, even though I was nowhere near being serious.

And then, the forceful deactivation of his spell was also caused by him. Of course, I couldn't directly stop with the Spell since was an Advanced Spell. But, I didn't need to go that far.

Fire runs on oxygen to remain active. Even though Ivan's mana summoned flames, it ate at the oxygen around in order to maintain its stable state. Using SPELLCRAFT, I merged my mana with the surroundings and deprived his palm region of any oxygen. This caused his spell to malfunction partway through and fail.

Of course, the more he tried to activate it, the less it would even work at all. That was why it reached a point where the flames didn't appear at all.

He then proceeded to use melee attacks once again, forgetting I was superior in combat. However, my body wasn't in the best state, so I simply used SPELLCRAFT to harden the surface tension of the air, coagulating space particles with my mana. This caused the invisible shields to protect me.

I didn't have enough focus and energy to completely shield my entire body, so I used my eyes to trail his movements, predicting where he would strike. This allowed me to create little shields only in those areas.

As for the last spell I used to render him unconscious, it was also due to the aid of SPELLCRAFT. Using oscillating waves at low frequencies, I sent them in varying proportions to his ear regions.

Some people weren't aware of this, but the ears are responsible for balance in any human body. Picking up sounds in form of waves makes the ear maintain a state of equilibrium.

By distorting the waves and sending various types in uneven proportions, I caused a forced state of imbalance in Ivan. The forced and sudden perception of both high and low frequencies rapidly registering in his nerves caused him to experience artificial pain, sending him into a state of unconsciousness.

'Of course, it was all hallucinatory. His physical self remains unharmed— well, he did fall, so that was already enough damage on his body.'

I sighed in silence, feeling a little frustrated. Using so much effort for such small fry was stupid of me. However, if I had just relied on brute force, I may have destroyed the property of the Academy.

'I had no choice...'

Of course, that wasn't true— but I took solace in that excuse.

KNOCK

KNOCK

I heard steady bangs on my door. A feeling of annoyance welled up within me. My body was in no shape to move anywhere, yet why was I being disturbed.

Sighing, I sluggishly stepped out of bed and moved to answer the knock— just in case it was important.

"Yess, who's the-?"

My tired voice stopped midway upon realizing no one was standing at the other end. I had opened the door to no one!

'Which bastard did this?!' My inner self went wild with fury.

Was I already so tired that I was experiencing audible hallucinations? No, there was no way. Someone had definitely knocked! They must have scurried off the moment they did this. My mind was seething in annoyance, wondering who would have the gall to do such a thing after experiencing my match with Ivan.

The burning anger within me melted the moment my eyes fell to the ground and I saw a container with a note affixed to it. My eyes bulged instantly, recognizing the box that sat on the smooth surface of the floor.

"M-my lunch!"

My voice was emotional as I nearly broke down seeing such a miraculous existence. I had never been as grateful in both my lives for seeing food. I felt an odd feeling of nirvana at that moment and slowly moved to touch the item, making sure I wasn't hallucinating.

'It's real!'

Chapter 69 - Fear

'It's real!' My eyes widened further.

Picking up the box, I read the shabby note affixed to it. The handwriting was awful, as though it was written in a hurry.

~ This is your lunch. We never ate it. We are sincerely sorry for taking such a precious thing, please have mercy. We beg of you. Please don't report us to the authorities or take personal action. We'll do anything! That's a promise!~

"Pfft!" A laugh leaked out.

My lips curled up to make a broad grin the moment I realized who my benefactors were. If only they had done this sooner— those idiots.

Since my mood had significantly improved, I decided to let them off. Of course, this would only apply after they fulfilled their end of the offer rendered.

"... They'll do anything, uh? Interesting..."

Evening soon arrived and dinner was brought. Everyone strolled down to get their share— including Ivan and his squad. The first to reach the food site was me, causing everyone to look at each other strangely.

Surprised that I, who was never an early comer, got to the food site before anyone else.

I gave passive looks at the uncomfortable students as they each took their food and hurriedly left, the scene of this afternoon was still etched into their minds.

When it was the turn of Ivan's squad, they appeared even more nervous— Ivan most especially.

Quickly deciding to act like the rest and take their food quickly, they made for their boxes. However...

"What do you think you're doing?" I asked with an imposing tone.

At that moment, they all looked in my direction and saw me give them an evil smile. My grin stretched so far and wide that one could mistake me for a demon, but I didn't care.

Moving closer to them, I gave a slight huff— causing the group to shiver.

"I saw your note."

The moment I said this, Ivan's minions nodded respectfully and bowed their heads to offer sincerity. The ringleader looked surprised that his mobs were acting with allegiance, but before he said anything I interrupted.

"What are you waiting for, Ivan? Do you want another round? Or do you want me to report your actions to the authorities? Choose."

It seemed that even after his beatdown, the idiot still had a great deal of pride left. Using my imposing tone, I offered his choices. If he still planned on acting stuck-up, only a cruel fate awaited him.

Clenching his teeth in frustration, Ivan finally gave in. Bowing his head, just like the rest of the people around him, he offered an apology. Of course, it wasn't sincere.

'Forced or not, he apologized. I suppose this should for now...'

I wasn't a petty person who only wanted an apology, so it didn't matter if he offered his without meaning it. This was only a pretext for my actual desire.

"Your dinner. Hand 'em over!" I stated blankly.

Everyone's eyes bulged in shock the moment I said this. It was so forward, so crude, so imposing— but there was no way to ask for their meals, now was there?

Ivan and his mobs remained silent, looking at me with surprise. They probably didn't think of me as someone who would resort to something like this.

"What? You're not going to do it? I suppose you didn't mean what you wrote in that letter. If that's the case, then I should also—"

From my tone, they knew what I was talking about. The letter told me the group was willing to do anything in exchange for mercy. If that was true, then their dinner was only a small price to pay.

"N-no, please wait!" They yelled the moment I was leaving.

It was a difficult choice to make. Food was important to everyone, after all. However, if they knew what was good for them...

Just as expected, they all gave me their dinner— even Ivan who seemed like he would rather die. In the end, none of them were keen on being punished for stealing.

Unlike them, I would receive no penalty for my actions since they gave their food to me willingly.

“Huu... I have twelve dinner packs here...” I mumbled, looking at the plates before me.

Of course, it would be impossible for me to finish everything in a single night. I had a large appetite, but— just like every human, I had limits.

Still, this much was necessary for what I would be performing tonight!

‘During our stay here, I haven’t meditated even once...’

The reason was due to the fact that we were being watched. I didn’t want any eyes of suspicion to fall on me. Another pivotal reason was the limited food provided for all of us. A certain quantity of meals was given, and while they contained high nutritional value, and could be said to be enough for any student our age— the food supply was limited.

‘Circulating the flow of mana in my body, strengthening and forming my Mana Core... they take a huge amount of energy and stamina!’

Even back when I was in my house, I constantly had food being delivered to me after every session. The household was all aware of the fact that I ate huge amounts of food.

It wasn’t that I was a glutton— though the food brought to me was always delicious, I needed the energy to keep going in my mana circulation. If I didn’t restock, I would run out of gas and pass out.

It was dangerous doing something like that here since food wasn’t at my beck and call. However, now that I had highly nutritious meals... I could pull it off!

‘Let’s start by strengthening my already existing Mana Cores...’

I didn’t care for supervision at this point. Getting stronger was more important— plus, they wouldn’t even be able to notice what was going on within my body. If they were curious and asked, I could simply come up with an excuse and pin it on my family or something.

“Huu... let’s begin.” A whisper escaped my pursed lips.

It would be a long night, but if I was fortunate, I would be able to make significant progress. Even if I wasn’t close to making a 4th Core, increasing the potency and capacity of my other cores took priority.

‘Hehehe...’

Chapter 70 - Bottom Of The Barrel

“T-that’s unbelievable...” Damien’s voice trailed the moment Klaus finished his report.

To think that a brat whom he had deemed worthless due to his Core would beat someone as talented as Ivan so easily. Klaus wouldn’t dare lie to him about something like that, so Damien knew it had to be accurate.

“I refuse to accept that!” Damien banged his hand on his desk.

The sudden sound of his clenched fist hitting the flat surface of the table startled Klaus, causing him to jump slightly.

Damien's anger could be clearly seen, so the supervisor did nothing except swallow his saliva in discomfort. The reason for Damien's annoyance was something anyone who knew him was well aware of.

Damien Lawcroft hated White Mana Core Grade, no, untalented Magic-Users. He despised them deeply. The reason for his deep-seated hatred was shrouded in mystery, though a few rumors were flying around concerning this.

'Sigh, let's just get this over with so I can leave already!' Klaus screamed internally.

"I can't accept this. Maybe Ivan was having a bad day. It happens to Magic-Users sometimes... besides, we still don't know why his fire spell malfunctioned..." Damien muttered, trying to bring up all manner of excuses.

Klaus just sighed silently. His superior didn't want to accept the fact that Ivan lost due to his inferiority in ability compared to Jared. Even if he managed to dismiss the results of the duel— if it could be called that, it didn't change the fact that Jared's perfect score in the first two parts of his exam was beyond amazing. If not for the newly adopted third part of the exam, he would have easily scored the top spot.

Still, Klaus knew better than to say this to Damien who was seething in annoyance, too drowned in his prejudice to think rationally.

"Well, it doesn't matter in the end. Even if he managed to best Ivan, there's no hope for him now... after all..."

Klaus knew quite well what his superior meant by the words he spoke in a low undertone. The Placements of everyone had already been decided, and Jared belonged to the Lower Class.

Not only would their education be of poorer quality compared to the rest, but they would also be shown the least preference when it came to issues of pertinence in the Academy. Even though the students there would be better than average by the time they graduated, they would be nothing compared to those in other classes.

The prejudice against lower placed students was also something that would terribly affect their mentality and perception in society. As a staff of the great Ainzlark Academy, Klaus felt a little upset by the current system.

The reason they had adopted this new method was because of the Supremest faction who valued talent and bloodline above all else. They were made up of nobles and high-ranking officials in the Kingdom and their goals were simply to shackle those who they considered 'unworthy' to rise to a position of prominence.

Of course, Damien Lawcroft was a member of this faction— and a high-ranking one at that. Exerting his influence, among others, they were finally able to make the educational reform and segregate the talented from the less adept.

It wasn't like their idea didn't have any advantages attached. If there were no merits, Ainzlark would never implement such a policy. However, the rationale behind such a plan was the discrimination against the less talented— that alone made the cause contaminated.

'Whatever... I should just mind my business...' Klaus heaved another heavy sigh.

He did have a fleeting thought as Damien began addressing him once more, making sure the preparations were made for the students who would be making it to the Upper-Class.

'Jared Leonard seems like such a promising individual... if only things were different...'

As expected, we were all called out of the apartment after having breakfast. Since it was our last day in the place, everyone was already prepared for what came next.

"We'll be moving you to the main auditorium now. The rest of the students would have gathered there already." Klaus Tallman spoke to us.

As the supervisor in charge of our male group, he had personally come to gather us for the assembly.

'I haven't seen him since the first day...' My thoughts trailed, recollecting that several other staff took charge on their respective days.

According to what Klaus was saying, the true academic session began today and we were all to gather at the central auditorium. Even though we had been given a tour of the school grounds and knew our way there, it only made sense that he would escort us personally.

'I suppose this will be the last time I will be receiving such treatment.'

The Lower-Class awaited me, after all.

Flowing Klaus like obedient labs, our group of boys trailed behind. Before long, we met up with the female students. They were, of course, being led by their female supervisor. I wasn't aware of her name, but it was only a matter of time.

Though most of the girls had eyes on a few boys— like Ivan Smith or Stefan Netherlore, I felt a particular gaze on me. My eyes rolled as I could already guess who it was.

'I'm not going to look!'

No matter how hard Maria Helmsworth stared, I decided not to pay her any attention. Focusing on the path before us, my mind trailed to my session the previous night.

The food I received from Ivan and his group was barely enough to sustain me throughout the night. I was so hungry once breakfast arrived that I devoured my meal on the spot.

I saw the students look at me with curious glances as I ate, especially Ivan's crew— who were surprised that I could eat with such gumption after having a feast to myself the previous night.

They weren't aware of the pains I went through, though. And it was all worth it!

Even though I was merely a White Mana Core Grade, the amount of energy stored in my individual cores was equivalent, if not superior to any of the students around. Well, exceptions like Maria and Stefan, maybe Ivan existed. Still, to think I had three Mana Cores with equal proportion to a Yellow Core Grade... individually!

'I've become quite strong...'

Still, it wasn't enough. We were now heading into the lion's den. The grand assembly where all Ainzlark students were gathered. I would be meeting my seniors there, plus we would all be divided into categories.

While my fate was drawing the short end of the stick, I had no intention of remaining at the bottom.

'Bring it on! I'll show you what happens when you underestimate me!'