

Fairy Tail 288

Chapter 288: x784's S-Class Candidates

The next evening, the entire guild had gathered in the main hall. And just like when the Miss Fairy Tail pageant was held, a stage had been lowered from one of the walls. While all the A-Class wizards and below were gathered in the audience area, Makarov and all the S-Class wizards stood on the stage.

Though none of the S-Class wizards usually wore weapons of any kind in most situations, today, three of them had something extra on their person. First, there was Alfonzo with his tonfa strapped to his lower back. Then, there was Erza with her longsword sheathed on her hip. And lastly, there was Elicia with a black, leathery wristband with silver, metallic fixtures holding a number of sewing needles of various sizes.

When Elicia came into the guild hall in the morning with this wristband around her wrist, and dark circles under her eyes, the girls who had been teasing her the day before almost felt bad about what they had said to her. But at the same time, they felt proud of being able to get Elicia to focus on her [Soul Weapon Embryo] for a decent amount of time.

Then just like Erza had done the day before, Elicia requested a spar with Alfonzo, which he accepted happily. Though, since this one happened during the normal training hours, there was not so much of an audience to witness it.

After that, things went as usual. Until Makarov gathered everyone together for an announcement.

"Good evening, my children." Makarov said from the top of the stage while he was flanked by Gildarts and Ur. "I'm sure most, if not all, of you know why I have gathered you."

Hearing Makarov's opening statement, most of the A-Class wizards in the guild showed clear excitement. Like Makarov said, they knew why they were gathered. And the only thing they could do was wait for the rest of the announcement.

"In seven days, Fairy Tail's x784 S-Class Promotion Exam will commence." Makarov continued. "And today we are gathered for the announcement of the rules for this year and the participants."

With that, the atmosphere in the guild hall rose to another level.

"Just like every year, the exam will be held at our guild's ancestral home, Tenrou Island. And like we have for the last few years, we can thank Alfonzo for the transportation to the island via his ship." Makarov said, this part of his announcement surprising no one. "This year's exam will be a bit different, though. This time around, each participant must find a partner to take the exam with among the wizards below S-Class. And your teamwork will be one of the criteria on which we will grade your performance."

Hearing the second part, however, caused the entire guild to be taken aback for at least a moment. Like Makarov said, usually the S-Class Promotion Exam only tested a wizard's individual capabilities. But considering how often most wizards work in teams to complete quests, this was not all that strange if one thought about it.

"As for the S-Class wizards, don't worry." Makarov said with a grandfatherly smile. "They'll be participating in the exam, as well. As both your opponents and the examiners."

With that said, all the S-Class wizards on the stage with Makarov smiled at the crowd. Though, everyone in the crowd felt as if they could see the images of demons and monsters floating behind them.

"And now that all that is out of the way, let's announce this year's eight participants." Makarov said, raising the hall's atmosphere to its peak.

With that, all the A-Class wizards in the guild waited in anticipation for the eight names who would be called to participate in this year's S-Class Exam.

"Gray Fullbuster..."

When his name was called, Gray did not react much. Though, he did nod his head confidently.

"Yes, Juvia will team up with her darling Gray." Juvia shouted happily. "Then, with the power of our love, we will defeat all those who stand in our way!"

However, when Gray heard Juvia's declaration, he almost stumbled, even though he was standing still.

"... Elfman Strauss..."

"Yeah! Because I'm a real man!" Elfman shouted with his fists raised over his head.

"*Sigh* Big Brother..." Lisanna muttered with her hand over her face.

Meanwhile, on the stage, Mirajane secretly pinched and twisted Alfonzo's waist while mouthing the words, "This is your fault."

"... Levy McGarden..."

"Really? Me?" Levy asked in a surprised tone.

"Congratulations, Levy." Jet and Droy cheered in unison, before they glared at each other as if they were trying to decide who would be her partner in the exam.

"... Cana Alberona..."

Like Gray, Cana did not react much either. But the determination in her gaze grew stronger.

Although Cana did not react much, both Alfonzo and Elicia, who felt that something was off, looked at her with concern.

"... Fried Justine..."

Fried nodded in response to hearing his name called. Meanwhile, Bickslow and his dolls laughed happily for their friend's success.

"... Juvia Lockser..."

"Wait, does that mean Juvia can't team up with her beloved Gray?" Juvia muttered, as she started melting into a puddle of water on the floor.

"... Sun Seto..."

"Sun! You did it! Daddy's rooting for you!" Gozaburo shouted before Sun could react. "Masa, did you bring the recording lacrima?"

Immediately after hearing her father, Sun's happy expression turned into an embarrassed one as she lowered her head in shame.

Bang!

"Stop embarrassing her!" Ren shouted as she punched Gozaburo in the gut and caused him to fall to his knees in pain. "Can't you show even a shred of dignity"

"... and Mest Gryder..." Makarov said, bringing the announcement to an end.

"What?" Natsu shouted, not believing that his name was not called to participate in this year's exam. "Didn't you forget someone, Gramps?"

While most of the guild were just as surprised as Natsu, there were a few who understood the case.

"Natsu, I thought I explained this back when you went on that unauthorized S-Class quest back in the summer." Makarov said in a stern tone. "You proved to me on that day that you were not ready to be an S-Class wizard."

"Yeah, but..." Natsu said, trying to protest.

"Therefore, for this year, you were excluded from the list of participants. But as long as you don't do anything like that again, your name should be on the list of participants for next year."

With Makarov's explanation, everyone who was surprised by Natsu's non participation remembered the event he was referring to and could only look at Natsu with sympathy. Natsu, on the other hand, could only look on blankly with his mouth and eyes wide open in disbelief.

At the same time, while all this was going on, Alfonzo and Elicia had their gazes fixed on Mest, who they knew was sent by the Magic Council to infiltrate the guild. But even if they did not know that due to their meta knowledge, the fact that neither of them recognized his magic power signature would have been a red flag.

"Now, my children, choose your partners wisely." Makarov said, quieting all the discussion in the hall with his voice. "Like I said before, you have seven days to prepare. Then, you must gather at Hargeon

Port by 10 am on December 15, or you will be immediately disqualified from the exam. Now, let me see whom among you will become Fairy Tail's next S-Class wizard!"

With that, Makarov and the S-Class wizards left the stage. And as soon as they did, the eight S-Class candidates began to move.

"Bickslow, let's go." Fried said as he turned towards the guild's front doors. "We need to polish our tactics."

"Right." Bickslow said with a smile.

Meanwhile, Evergreen could only look at her two team mates with a left out expression. Then, she turned her attention towards the other participants, not wanting to be left out of this year's exam. A moment later, her eyes landed on a certain participant.

"Hey." Evergreen said as she approached her target. "Let me join you for the exam."

Meanwhile, Evergreen's target, Elfman turned around and looked at her in confusion.

"Uh... Sorry, Evergreen." Elfman said awkwardly. "but I was gonna ask my sister to team up with me."

As he spoke, Elfman looked in Lisanna's direction.

"Sorry Big Brother, but I'm gonna be Juvia's partner." Lisanna said while helping the spaced out Juvia to sit down at a table.

"Well?" Evergreen asked impatiently with her arms crossed under her breasts.

"But why me?" Elfman asked.

"Does that matter?" Evergreen asked, her impatience growing from not receiving an answer. "Will you choose me as your partner, or not?"

"Uh... Sure." Elfman replied a bit meekly, as he was slightly overwhelmed by Evergreen's pressure.

"Good, then let's get to training." Evergreen said as she turned towards the guild's front doors. "We can't show an unbeautiful performance during the exam."

Though he was confused, Elfman followed Evergreen out of the guild so they could start training together.

Meanwhile, on the other side of the crowd, a similar conversation was going on.

"Sun, Daddy will be your partner for the exam." Gozaburo said excitedly as he approached Sun.

"No way." Sun replied without hesitation.

Hearing Sun's instant rejection, Gozaburo's footsteps came to a stop while his smile froze on his face. Never in his wildest dreams did he think Sun would reject him.

"Boss, are you okay?" Masa asked as he caught Gozaburo before he fell to the floor.

And although Masa was not sure, he felt as if he saw the image of Gozaburo's soul escaping from his mouth.

"boss! Boss! Pull it together!" Masa shouted in panic.

"*Sigh* He's such a handful." Ren said as she made her way over to the bar while shaking her head exasperatedly.

Meanwhile, Sun quickly made her way over to Marin and wrapped her in a hug.

"Marin, will you be my partner for the exam?" Sun asked with a smile.

"Of course." Marin replied with a smile of her own while returning the hug.

Meanwhile, in another part of the crowd...

"come on, Levy, we should get going." Jet said with a smile. "We need to start training."

"What are you talking about, Jet?" Droy asked in an agitated tone.

"Well, isn't that obvious?" Jet asked confidently. "Levy is obviously going to pick me as her partner, right?"

"And why would she pick you?" Droy asked angrily. "Isn't it obvious that she'd pick me?"

"What did you say?" Jet fired back.

And just like that, Jet and Droy began arguing over who would be Levy's partner during the exam, not even waiting to hear Levy's input. Meanwhile, Levy could only look at her two childhood friends with a troubled expression on her face.

"Hey, Pipsqueak!" Gajeel said aggressively, ignoring the bickering young men.

"Uh... Yes?" Levy replied in surprise.

"I'm gonna be your partner for this exam." Gajeel said in a tone of finality.

"Okay." Levy said, agreeing absent-mindedly.

"Good, let's go." Gajeel replied with a satisfied nod. "I'm glad I can do this with you. I can't wait to fight those guys."

With that said, Gajeel grabbed Levy by the arm and dragged her towards the guild's front doors so they could start training together, leaving Jet and Droy behind with stunned expressions on their faces.

After hearing Gajeel mention that he was glad to be doing the exam with her, Levy blanked out while blushing slightly. Unfortunately, that caused her to miss the rest of what Gajeel had to say while she let herself be dragged along.

Standing at the front of the crowd, Gray was considering who he should ask to be his partner.

Unlike in the canon version of events, the Celestial Spirit, Leo, or rather Loke never joined the guild since he was never banished from the Celestial World. As a result, he never made a promise with Gray to help him during the S-Class Promotion Exam.

While looking around and assessing potential partners, Gray made eye contact with Natsu. Holding that eye contact for a few seconds, Gray eventually shook his head and looked in a different direction.

"Hey, come on, Gray!" Natsu shouted when he saw Gray shake his head. Let me team up with you! We're already on the same team, after all."

"not a chance." Gray replied. "I can't team up with someone so stupid if I wanna pass the exam."

"What did you say?" Natsu asked angrily.

Ignoring Natsu, Gray found the person he thought would be the perfect partner for him. So, he made his way straight over to her.

"Hey, Meredy, will you team up with me for the exam?" Gray asked.

"Sure." Meredy replied with a smile. "Since you use the same magic as Ur and Ultear, I should have no problem working with you."

"Thanks." Gray replied with a smile. "I'll be counting on you."

"Leave it to me." Meredy replied while thumping her fist on her chest.

Meanwhile, two people were staring at this pair with grievance in their eyes.

"While Natsu wore a somewhat depressed expression, he started thinking about what led him to this point. And realized that his impulsive behavior was the cause. Then, he started a serious introspection.

Seeing Natsu's expression, Happy started to get worried.

"Someone, anyone, help!" Happy shouted in worry.

"What's wrong, Happy?" Lucy asked curiously, a bit of worry in her tone.

"It's Natsu, something's wrong with him!" Happy shouted.

"Really, I can't see anything wrong with him, though." Lucy replied.

"He's thinking!" Happy shouted. "Natsu's using his brain! Something must definitely be wrong!"

That seemed to be enough to snap Natsu out of his contemplation.

"Happy, how could you say that?" Natsu asked in an agitated tone. "Why does it mean something has to be wrong with me if I stop to think. It's not like I never use my brain."

Hearing that, all the nearby wizards remained silent.

"Right?" Natsu asked as he looked around at all the nearby wizards.

One by one, as Natsu made eye contact with someone, they turned away, not daring to make eye contact.

"Right...?" Natsu asked again, this time not nearly as sure of himself.

A moment later, Natsu felt that he had been tapped on his shoulder. Looking in the direction of the pat, he saw Happy smiling at him.

"Just accept it." Happy said.

In response, Natsu could only stare blankly at his best friend before walking away with a pout on his face.

Meanwhile, the other person who was staring at Gray and Meredy was naturally, Juvia.

"That little hussy." Juvia muttered in a dangerous tone. "She's trying to steal Gray's love from Juvia."

"Uh, I don't think that's the case." Lisanna said with a wry smile. "I think Gray chose her because his master, Ur, trained her, too. On top of that, she often teams up with Ultear."

A moment later, however, Lisanna realized she had said the wrong thing to try and console Juvia, as she heard the sound of water boiling from right next to her.

"That thieving hussy is trying to take away all of Juvia's soul mates." Juvia said in a gloomy tone while she gave off a dark aura.

"*Sigh* Let's just go and start training, Juvia." Lisanna said in a tired tone. "If you show Gray how strong you are, then I'm sure you'll be able to gain his heart."

Hearing that, Juvia nodded strongly. Then, she followed Lisanna to the elevator as they had already decided that they would train in the gravity chambers inside the guild hall.

Like that, the night continued uneventfully as the members of the guild not participating in the S-Class Promotion Exam began discussing who they thought would pass the exam this year. Eventually, everyone went home, deciding to call it a night.

Not long later, Wendy, while making her way to Fairy Hills, ran into Mest, who asked her to be his partner. And she accepted, despite Carla's protests.

At the same time, Lucy, who had just arrived at her new apartment, decided she was going to take a bath after a long day spent training. But after entering her bathroom and taking a shower, when she turned towards her bath, she was surprised to see Cana already sitting in it, chugging a bottle of whiskey.

"Cana, why are you here?" Lucy asked in confusion. "And why are you drinking in my bathtub."

"*Sigh* If I don't become S-Class after this exam, I think I'm gonna quit the guild." Cana said in a forlorn tone.

Completely shocked by Cana's declaration, Lucy listened to Cana's story. In the end, she offered to be Cana's partner during the exam and promised to help her pass.

'Still, I think I should tell Alfonzo about this later.' Lucy thought to herself while she continued to talk with Cana about their training schedule for the next week