

SPELLCRAFT 311

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Chapter 311: Return To Ainzlark [Pt 2]

In our entire lifetime, my friends and I only found six out of the twenty-two Arcanas.

Of the six;

The Fool was lost to our memory.

The Devil was given to the Demons

And the remaining four were kept in our Base which existed in the Forgotten Lands.

I spent the last three years—which were extended to over a hundred—within the Base. I learned of their nature, studied the powers they had, and made them my own.

Of course, those weren't the only things I focused on.

Alchemy. Core Formation. Familiar Nurturing. Magic Expansion... and other phenomenal changes that occurred within those years.

I made progress by leaps and bounds.

Still, since my attention was spread to several areas, I couldn't completely make the Arcanas my own. In essence, to utilize the full capabilities of these miraculous items, I needed to use them directly.

Arcanas had nigh infinite durability.

They contained Phenomenal Magic that could change the world and its concepts.

They contained a vast stream of energy, and could be simply refilled using the essence of their surrounding—most times, their wielder themselves.

The full depth of these items was currently beyond my purview, and so, I had to rely on them on rare occasions.

One of those scenarios came up.

'The Tower!'

Having the ability to warp the very concept of space, the Arcana gave me access to any location I wanted to get to—so far as I knew its geographical position. Of course, it had several other abilities, but... this was plenty enough.

>VWUUUSSHHH!<

In a flash, I left the regular place I stood, and found myself at my desired destination.

The effects of my coat still made me perfectly undetectable, and the use of 'The Tower' gave me a smooth appearance—almost as though I had always been there.

"Finally..." I whispered.

A smile formed as my lips were curled up. I took in the fresh fragrance of the lush flowers and the serene atmosphere. It had been too long.

"... It's good to be back!"

The vast landscape of Ainzlark Academy greeted me with its splendor.

The lovely structures, towering buildings, and colorful plants, all welcomed my sight as I witnessed them.

I could see students walking along the cleared paths of the Academy—most likely heading for class.

'It's still morning, after all...'

My smile grew broader as I saw groups of students discussing as they went on to class.

It wasn't just their faces that I focused on—but their Cores as well.

"Hm..."

Of the five who walked to class, two had amazing Mana Cores—the Yellow Core Grade, almost at the Blue stage. Their white uniforms indicated that they were still First Years, causing me to marvel at their talent.

The remaining three of the five had average Mana Cores, yet all five conversed normally and were heading in the same direction.

'Those two would have belonged to the Upper Class... but since they are all heading toward the same classroom, then...'

Anabelle was right, after all.

'... The Class System has been abolished!'

That brought a smile to my face, allowing me to draw closer to the students.

'I should ask them...'

Undoing the 'Unknowable' Magic Function of my Coat, I casually approached the five of them—making sure I had a genuine smile on my face.

"Excuse me, students."

"ARHH!!!" They jointly yelped—with the exception of one, who still appeared shaken.

'He must have good control of his emotions...'

My voice seemed to have startled them, causing the five to sharply turn in my direction with apprehensive expressions.

'C'mon... I tried my best to be natural...'

They created some distance between me and huddled to form a tight circle. As I awkwardly stood from them, they began speaking in hushed whispers.

"W—who is this guy?"

"We've been training our Mana detection ability... how could we not sense him?"

"Is he a powerful senior?"

"No. He's not dressed in the Uniform."

"T—then, maybe he's..."

"No. There's no way. He looks too weak and plain."

As they kept talking, mixing some clearly offensive words in their statements, I gave a wry smile.

'I can hear everything, you know...?'

Of course, I wasn't actually offended, but... it didn't feel very pleasant for kids to actively ignore me—especially when I approached them for a purpose.

Thankfully, before I lost my patience, their circle disbanded and the five of them looked at me. Their gazes rang with suspicion and caution.

"W—who are you?" The one who seemed to be the leader spoke up.

He was the most powerful, based on his Mana Core quality—though I knew, more than anyone, that it was dangerous to assume strength based on only that factor.

The group of students awaited my answer, staring at me with interest.

'There's nothing really spectacular about me, though...'

Sure, I had a very handsome face, and my clothing was made up of only the best materials—my hair also had a regal quality to it—but, I made sure not to stand out too much.

"Ah, yeah... I'm an acquaintance of one of your Lecturers here. I came to visit him."

That was good enough... right?

As expected, the guards of the students dropped, and they slowly began to loosen their tense muscles—at least from what I observed.

"O—oh! We're sorry for our rude actions."

"Sorry!" The others chimed in after the leader spoke.

'Even though the Class System has been banned, the strongest will be recognized as superior. That hasn't changed...'

It wasn't necessarily bad, though. That was simply the way of the world.

Even the previously suspecting students had a change of attitude because I mentioned my connection to someone superior to them.

Since I must have passed the layers of security that existed before entering the Academy, and I also knew a Lecturer, they must have assumed that I wasn't a threat to them—though the latter proved I was someone deserving of respect.

"It's been a while since I last stepped foot in Ainzlark Academy, so... I would like to ask of his whereabouts from you."

"Please tell us their name. We'll guide you accordingly!" They said with enthusiasm.

'Now, that's more like it!'

"He goes by the name of Neron Kaelid."

Immediately after I said this, the students appeared shocked—and then confused.

'Have I missed the mark? Or is Neron no longer here?'

After a short moment of hesitation, the leader finally mumbled something that shattered my expectations.

"Professor Neron Kaelid is actually..."

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Chapter 312: Unexpected Discovery

I was dumbfounded!

Of all the things that could happen, I wasn't expecting this...

"You mean... Neron Kaelid is...?!"

"Yes. He is the current Headmaster of our Academy..."

'HEADMASTER? NERON?!'

It was almost unbelievable for me, but I had to control my emotions. Anabelle didn't tell me anything about this!

'What exactly happened after I left?'

"I see..." Was all I could mutter at the students.

They began looking at me oddly. It seemed their suspicion was returning, but I couldn't care at this point.

"Alright... I don't suppose you could tell me where I could find him?"

I knew where the Headmaster's office was, but I hadn't been there before. Plus, with all the changes that had occurred here, it was possible that the office had been swapped too.

"W—well, it's at the Towering Hall, same as before."

"Ah, I see..." I mumbled.

'Looks like it's still the same place.'

"Thanks for your help."

Making sure it was a pure one, I gave the five students a genuine smile. What they had done was nothing special, but... perhaps their very existence made me happy within.

So much so that an idea—no, more like a question—popped into my head.

"Why did you come to study at Ainzlark Academy? Surely you heard of the incident that occurred here a few years ago."

The guardians and students had to have been told of the Demonic Disturbance as a warning and a form of indoctrination. Knowing Ainzlark Academy, that much was guaranteed.

Four of the five of them were a bit hesitant to answer—most likely because they didn't have a choice in the matter. Their parents must have still made the decision for them, so... none of them could have refused, anyway.

"Because of the stories I heard!" The only confident one spoke.

'Oh? So, not only is he powerful... he also has charisma...' I smiled, staring at the kid before me.

"What stories?"

"During the Disturbance, all the students overcame the assault with their own power. Even when the Lecturers were useless, they alone took care of the mess!"

I smiled slightly.

"These students... did you know them?"

"N—no... they graduated before I arrived here, but..."

A sparkle appeared in his eyes, giving me a good idea of how much he idolized the characters in the stories he heard.

"The top contributors in that incident became the 9 Rankers and the Top Honored Graduates of Ainzlark Academy! Their names are recorded in the Ainzlark Hall of Remembrance!"

The title of 'Top Honored Graduates' belonged to the ten most outstanding students recorded since the school's inception. If a student surpassed the achievement of a past student, they would be placed in the Ainzlark Hall of Remembrance.

"Really? What are their names?"

At this point, the other silent students burst with life. This was a topic that interested them all, so it seemed.

"Ciara Epilson. Anabelle Frederick. Edward Karl Leon. Maria Helmsworth. Jerry Keller..."

These five names belonged to those in the generation of those who were involved in the Demonic Disturbance.

'As expected, Stefan and Kuzon aren't there...'

Even my name wasn't mentioned. None of us graduated, after all.

"So, who holds the top rank among the Top Honored Graduates?" I asked with an amused smile.

"His name is a mix of uncertain letters. It's in code..."

'Ah, that... so it still hasn't changed...'

I was also initially curious about the name when I first enrolled in the Academy. However, I eventually realized it could only have belonged to one person.

Neron Kaelid himself.

"What of the second?"

"Ah, that is still Lewis Griffith, the Great Sage!"

"Ah, I see..."

So, no one had upturned my achievements yet. I didn't know whether to be disappointed or relieved.

'Welp, at least my name is on the list... right?'

"B—But! I believe there is someone who deserves to make the list! His name wasn't just put there simply because he didn't graduate!"

That was a surprising remark.

"Oh? Really? What do you mean?"

The five students grew restless and their faces were brimming with excitement—almost like they were sharing a rumor with me.

"He's the unofficial Ranker of Ainzlark Academy!"

"Yes! The hero who led the others to victory against the Demonic Disturbance!"

"A Magic User of unparalleled power and wisdom!"

"The Academy was too small for him, so he set forth to explore the world!"

"He should be the one taking the top spot among the Top Honored Graduates!"

The way they introduced this spectacular character almost seemed like a script. Their bodies danced with excitement, and their cheeks blushed fervently. Light of worship glowed in their eyes.

"His name is..."

They paused for an effect, and I gave a wry smile.

"... JARED LEONARD, the Unofficial Top Ranker!"

'Ah, figures...'

Why wasn't I surprised? Well, Anabelle had told me about how I was popular among the students of Ainzlark Academy.

'... To think it was to this degree.'

"Is this a sentiment shared only among the First Years?"

"NO!" I was met with a sharp response from all of them.

"I heard from the seniors that they knew some of the Top Honored Graduates! And that they would always praise Jared Leonard's efforts!"

"Yeah! He is the hero who saved everyone, after all!"

"Miss Aloe Vida even told us in a Magic Class that Jared Leonard was powerful enough to be a lecturer in his First Year!"

'Ah, that woman too?! What were those people thinking?'

A surge of emotion assailed me, and before I could control myself, I found myself bursting out...

"Pfft... Puehehe... Puahahahaha!!!"

... in an amused eruption of laughter.

Once again, the students looked at me oddly.

But, at this point, I didn't mind them.

"Hahaha! You guys... thanks for the info. You should get going to Class now."

I laughed, even more, walking away from the group.

Their gazes were still placed on my back, but after a while, they turned and went their way.

I kept laughing even as I heard their departing footsteps—looking toward the Towering Hall that stood at the center of the Academy.

"So, you're there, Neron."

It had been ages since we had last spoken, and so much had changed. Still, I could find a vast amount of excitement and anticipation well up within me.

There were two major things I was looking forward to in our meeting.

One was seeing how much progress my mentor had made.

And the second?

'Let me show you how much I've grown too!'

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Chapter 313 Mentor And Protege [Pt 1]

Neron Kaelid sighed as he sat behind his desk.

His dark hair firmly sat atop his handsome, pale face.

He had a perfect façade, but the look he gave made it seem like he was on the verge of breaking down.

Of course, this wasn't physical exhaustion. Neron's body was tailored by his Magic, making sure he was always in top state. This loop ensured that concepts like hunger, thirst, or tiredness—even pain—were foreign to him.

The cause for his pained expression stemmed from another problem, though.

'Ah, this is boring...' His mind wondered as he stared blankly at the completed paperwork in front of him.

Even though he had made sure to take his time when handling all of them, it still didn't take him very long to complete everything. Now that he was done with his task, the man wondered what to use the rest of his time for.

"Should I take a walk again...?"

Lately, that had been all he was doing. He was even so bored to the point of somehow desiring company—at least to enjoy himself.

Training would have been a good way to pass away time, but he was currently undergoing internal training, yet he sought something more stimulating.

"Sigh, even that troublesome woman would do right now..." Neron grumbled.

The lady in his thoughts was none other than Serah Crimson, his childhood 'friend' and supposed rival. She had some issues to attend to in the capital—last he heard—so she wouldn't even have his time.

Even though it was shameful to admit it, Neron had to spell out the truth for himself.

"I'm bored..."

No incident had occurred ever since the Demonic Disturbance.

He had suddenly been promoted to Provisional Headmaster—considering his level of power, and his contributions to Ainzlark Academy during the tragic incident.

Such a troublesome task was put within his grasp, and he would have refused. However, upon considering the highly influential position he had been put in, Neron finally decided to concede.

He had used his newfound connections and political power to weave himself into so many factions and even got himself the identity of several spies and suspicious personnel within their ranks.

Taking them out would be easy, but that would simply alert the true culprit. In that case, he simply had to bid his time perfectly.

After all, time was the one thing he had in surplus.

"Should I just take some time off?" The black-haired man mumbled underneath his breath.

Doing so would certainly prove to be something healthy for his current state. However, Neron remembered the last time he took some time away from Ainzlark Academy.

The casualties and destruction that followed were something he had to avoid at all costs.

As Headmaster, he was responsible for the lives of everyone presently residing in the Institute. While he wouldn't make any silly errors in his administration of the school, he often fretted over his wards.

"We have highly skilled students in this generation, but..."

Compared to the previous graduates—especially those of the previous sets and the one before them—they had a long way to go.

Neron knew it was unfair to compare their levels of growth. After all, the previous students had a critical element that these new ones didn't possess.

The person called Jared Leonard.

'That kid...'

Neron gave a wry smile as he rested well on his chair. Closing his eyes and inhaling deeply, his lips curled up even more. The man seemed pleased for some reason.

An image appeared in his mind.

"I wonder how he's doing now..."

"Who are you thinking about, I wonder?"

Neron's eyes popped wide open, and then his back bounced off the chair—making him sit straight in a jiffy.

"Nice reflexes." A passing comment echoed across the empty room, and a being suddenly manifested.

He had a long white lab coat, with a black shirt and black pants. His shoes were white—laced with gold and black designs—and his flowing blond hair fluttered a bit.

His golden eyes and charming smile were fully captured by Neron's black pupils, causing the man's expression to morph as soon as his brain connected the dots.

"Y—you are...?!"

The teenager's smile became larger and his lips parted to bring forth words.

"It's been a while... Neron."

Neron, the usually stoic man, jumped to his feet and gave a surprised gasp. His boredom had finally been shattered.

He could see a bright light of salvation standing before him. That was enough for him to break into a smile... and leak out the words of his one and only protégé.

"... Jared. You're back!"

I made sure to use my 'Unknowable' while entering Neron's office, and also 'The Tower' Arcana to warp into his office.

The Arcana allowed me to transport to a destination I hadn't been to before, as long as it was close by.

Since all I had to do was bypass Neron's door, it wasn't difficult to enter his office. I watched him for a short moment, waiting for the perfect time to make my entrance.

As expected, I picked up the perfect moment, making a perfect appearance.

'Neron looks happy. It seems he's happy to see me. Well, the feeling is mutual...'

"Yeah, I'm back. You look... the same..." I commented, smiling at the rough-looking outfit of my previous lecturer.

Nothing about him had changed—except the smile planted on his face.

"Yeah... I suppose." He shrugged, moving away from behind the desk where he was standing.

Before I knew it, he was slowly approaching me at a steady pace.

The obsessive smile on his face began to unnerve me a bit.

"Er... Neron...?"

Was he mad that I just popped into his office? If so, then—

"You're not an illusion, are you?" His voice was low, but it contained great weight.

Neron's intense gaze told me he required a prompt answer—rather, he demanded it!

"Um... no. It's actually me. Ah, are you okay?"

Now, I was getting slightly concerned. This wasn't how I envisioned our first meeting in years to turn out.

"Kukukukuku..." A short, deep chuckle escaped his lips.

'Eh?'

"Kuahahahahahaha!!!"

This had to be the first time I heard my Mentor laugh so loudly.

"Ah, I feel so much better now! It really is you, Jared!" A big smile formed as he doused his chuckle.

"Yep. Yep."

'Is this really Neron?'

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Chapter 314: Mentor And Protege [Pt 2]

Fortunately, Neron's surprising behavior didn't last very long.

After welcoming me and embracing me—which was extremely awkward—he returned to his seat as though nothing had ever happened.

Once he sat, closed his eyes, heaved a deep sigh, and looked at me for the umpteenth time, he finally returned to normal.

'Weirdo...'

"How long were you standing there? I'm amazed. I couldn't even detect you..." Neron remarked.

We were both seated, demarcated by Neron's large headmaster table.

"Trade secret. Hehe. Besides, it wasn't like you were even trying." I chuckled.

"Welp, fair point..."

Knowing his personality, even if I didn't reveal myself, it wasn't like I could harm him. Any amount of carelessness on Neron's part was inconsequential.

'While we're on that topic...'

"I see there's no form of defensive measure in your office. Why?"

I thought it was strange.

The whole Academy was saturated with protective Magic, yet Neron's domain was completely bare.

Why was that?

"Welp, I figured that would invite trouble. No one would want to target a very fortified place, right? So, if I make it easily accessible, I can have more trespassers." He explained.

'In essence, you're just bored...?' I nearly rolled my eyes in amusement.

"Headmaster, uh?" Containing my laughter, I looked around the very spacious office.

Several medals and awards littered the place. A mini-library occupied the left corner of the room, while the right had a shelf dedicated to some pretty neat Magic Tools and special awards.

The office was nicely furnished—as expected of Ainzlark Academy's top brass—and it had an air of ease.

"Please, don't bother with that." Neron sighed, resting his back on his chair.

"It's been very boring and uneventful as the head..."

His complaint couldn't exactly be taken at face value.

'I'm certain many would argue with that logic...'

Neron only considered the job to be stale because of the kind of person he was. Being the Headmaster of such a large-scale area meant a great deal of responsibility and pressure.

However, Neron was smart to a fault. His intelligence was miles ahead of his age—which was also deceiving. His management ability and innovations were capable of keeping the administrative affairs of Ainzlark Academy in order.

His Magic skills and teaching capabilities also made him the perfect fit for the role. From the nature of his Magic, he also never experienced exhaustion and several other limiting factors.

Since he could also employ the use of thousands of Familiars, Neron could keep a constant watch over Ainzlark. No task was difficult or time-consuming for him, so he probably thought of everything as monotonous.

'I know because... I would feel the same way!'

Neron was similar to me in many departments.

Three of the greatest factors that tied us both were our thirst for knowledge, our love for magic, and the unconventional methods used in our endeavors.

Which was why—of all the people in the Kingdom—there was no one I trusted and respected more than him.

"Now that you're here, I'm sure I can relieve myself of boredom a little!" Neron gave a slight smile.

I recognized the glint in his eyes. It was the same one that found expression in mine.

—Curiosity!

"How strong have you gotten?"

Our voices overlapped as we asked the same question.

Both of us smiled the moment the question was raised.

There was only one way to accurately find out.

"RESONANCE."

>VWUUUUUUSSSSHHHHHH<

Instantly, we infused our energy and connected our selves to each other.

'It's time to see for myself...'

I closed my eyes, and then opened them to witness a new world—the reality within Neron's inner self.

My eyes bulged in complete shock.

I was flabbergasted beyond belief.

It was an impossible sight!

'T—this is...!!!'

Before my eyes were several hundreds of thousands of Mana Cores—all white and occupying the vast expanse that surrounded me. That wasn't the most surprising aspect, though.

As I watched, with the interval of some seconds, new Mana Cores were forming.

'N—no... this can't...'

They burst into life—like blooming flowers, or surging stars.

It became meaningless to count them.

'T—then... if these are the Cores... how about...?!'

My heart felt like it couldn't handle any more, but...

... I had to see!

'How many Subcores does he have in each of them?!'

'Just what kind of monster have I created?'

Within each Mana Core—at least the ones I had time to explore—were at least five hundred thousand Subcores.

They littered the Mana Core space like stars in the night sky.

It was unbelievable!

Compared to the Neron of the past, this being was completely in a different league. He has attained a realm that was beyond my expectations.

'He's... he's....!!!'

Neron was shocked—nearly to the point of being frightened.

That was the first emotion that found expression within him the moment he laid eyes on Jared's internal space.

'I—impossible...!'

It was something that defied logic.

Jared's Mana Cores—unlike his own—were arranged in constellations.

They had patterns, links, and a network that was so organized that it made his own inner domain seem so unkempt.

The Mana Cores were a thousand in number, however, Neron knew that their quality and efficiency would surpass his own by far.

Instead of quantity, Jared went for quality.

Every single one of the thousand Mana Cores was white, and Neron had to assume that it was probably the limit of what his body could handle—or at least very close to it.

Within each Mana Core was a number of Subcores that were also arranged in an impeccable fashion. Jared's Subcores were a total of a thousand as well.

A thousand Subcores within each Mana Core.

The Core network was so intricate that Neron knew it must have taken a great deal of time and effort to achieve.

'It's perfect... flawless!'

If that was all he had seen, perhaps Neron's heart would have been able to bear it. However, there was one fundamental thing that completely shattered Neron's sense of Mana Cores and the system in which they operated.

"This... can't be..."

Neron said this, but his eyes and every sense of his astral body were experiencing the phenomenal sight of pure magnificence.

It started from Jared's Primary Mana Core—if it could be called that at this point.

The spherical cluster of energy was cleanly divided into two parts.

An equal half was white.

And the other side was.... Completely black!

The energy that poured out of the black side attracted Neron's attention, however... the moment he drew closer to it... he got pushed away.

Instantly, the shocked man could feel the Resonance breaking apart.

However, before he completely vanished from Jared's inner domain, he could tell what manner of energy the black substance was.

'Miasma! Jared has already...!!!'

Something that even he had thought to be impossible was achieved by his protégé.

The boy—Jared Leonard—had finally fused Mana and Miasma to form something else... something beyond his current understanding.

'A—Amazing...'

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Chapter 315: Mentor And Protege [Pt 3]

>FWUUUUUSSHHHH<

Neron felt himself get expelled from Jared's inner space.

Thanks to the black stuff's interference, their Resonance had been grossly affected, causing Neron's presence to be treated as a foreign entity that had to be removed.

'A—ah...'

Before long, everything became a blur, and he returned to his physical body.

His eyes opened, and he gazed longingly at Jared, who was also groggily opening his own.

Both of them stared at each other with amazement and more respect toward the other. Once again, they were of one heart and soul—minds thinking alike.

Opening their energetic mouths, they compressed the emotions and multitude of words into one simple statement.

"AMAZING!"

I had questions.

Of course, I would!

Neron had gotten crazily strong in such a short period. How was that possible? Plus, his body was housing way too many Mana Cores. How did he achieve that?

'I even had to dedicate a hundred years to reach this far...'

Was this a difference in talent? I was appalled and also very reverent at the achievement of this man. Still, I had to know!

"My Time Magic allows me to age my body in real-time, or quicken the rate by which I produce Mana Cores. Since it's an internal process, the process isn't very hard. Plus, I already had an excessive source of Mana, so creating more Cores wasn't very difficult."

That was his answer.

As simple as it sounded, it had worked efficiently for Neron—making him unbelievably stronger than the last time we met.

"I'm honestly grateful to you. I thought I couldn't grow stronger any longer, but... now I've far surpassed my past self!"

'Yeah! You're a monster among monsters now!'

"What about you, Jared? What was that within you? Did you finally—"

I smiled upon hearing him bring up the matter.

"You're talking about my joint Core formations, right?"

He nodded and looked at me with absolute sincerity.

"I finally found a way to balance the existence of Miasma and Mana. By transforming half of my Primary Mana Core into a Miasma Core, I was also able to make more Miasma Cores, connecting them in a circuit—just like I did for my Mana Cores."

"H—hold on... you have pure Miasma Cores in you?!"

"Yeah. You couldn't see them because I limited my Resonance with you. If I had used complete Resonance, maybe you could have seen them as well..."

"Why didn't you?"

"Because they're formed of Miasma. They would interfere with your Mana. Since you do not have Miasma, you can't resonate with my Cores."

Neron's eyes widened a bit upon receiving this revelation.

"Ohh! No wonder I was immediately disconnected once I came into contact with the Miasma part of your Primary Mana Core—or should I even call it that...?"

He was probably referring to the fact that my Core couldn't possibly be named as a 'Mana' entity since it also had Miasma forming half of it.

"I call it a Fusion Core. So far, I have a thousand White Mana Cores, a thousand Miasma Cores, and five hundred Fusion Cores—excluding the primary one. They're all connected by a system of intricacy, making the flow organized."

If I didn't carefully arrange the energy flow, then the opposing energies would ultimately clash with each other.

I also needed my Cores to be pure White, so all the previously colored Mana Cores were swallowed by White Cores, transforming them into Subcores.

"So, you can use both Miasma and Magic? That's incredible..."

"Yeah..." I opened the palms of both my hands, generating Mana on my right, and Miasma on the left side.

They both flickered—like flames—and danced atop my palms.

"... But that isn't all."

Squeezing my palms, the dark and light flames vanished.

"I created a new form of energy. Something that's neither Miasma nor Mana. The effects gave me a breakthrough that I have always wanted to have." I smiled.

Neron seemed very interested in my explanation, drawing closer with each statement I made.

It was nice to see another Magic enthusiast like me.

"It's called An—"

>WHAM!<

Before I could complete my statement, the door to Neron's office was flung open, and a person rushed inside.

She wore a flowing lab coat—pure white—and the rest of her formal attire was also white.

Having some sort of enchanted glasses in her eyes, her stern face was somehow filled with worry. The blond hair that sat atop her head fluttered as she ran into the office.

Something about her was... familiar.

She looked much younger than I was. Her flat chest spoke volumes of her immature growth, and the flushed expression on her face resembled a child, talkless of her short height.

'She's cute...'

Her bright blue eyes sharply turned in Neron's direction, and she quickly spoke before the sudden atmosphere died out.

"Headmaster, Neron! It's about Professor Maro. He had another accident in the research center!"

Once I heard the girl's voice, I was almost done piecing everything together. An image formed in my head. The girl from my memories was so similar to the young lady before me.

'They're both small, delicate, and... flat. So, it's really—!'

"Haa, what did he do now?" Neron interrupted my thought with a heavy grumble.

"He tinkered with the wrong Magic Items again and caused an explosion. Lots of properties and infrastructure have been damaged—and even he is heavily injured."

'Ainzlark has specialized staff who can use Healing Magic. Why bother reporting this so frantically to Neron?'

"And you need me to reverse all the damage and the negative effects of the accidents... AGAIN..." Neron remarked tiredly.

'Ah, so that's it!'

"Yes, sir!" The blond-haired lady—who seemed more like a younger girl—spoke with a far more mature tone than one would expect from someone like her.

"Haa... I see. Got it. You guys in the Research Department are the only ones who give me a headache." Neron stood from his seat.

"Apologies for that, sir! Since you always complain that you're bored, I thought you'd want some work to do."

'Pfft!'

For a child, she sure had nerve.

Even Neron froze once she said that. He looked at me with a bashful smile and rubbed his dark hair rigorously.

'HAAHAHAHA! How hilarious!'

Even after all these years, some things never changed. My friend was the exact same.

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Chapter 316: Friendly Reunion

"By the way, sir... who is that?" The child stared at me with eyes of curiosity.

Since I was backing her view, she couldn't completely see my face.

"Ah, right... I totally forgot about that." Neron said with a small laugh.

'Forgot, my foot. Were you just waiting for her to ask? If that's the case... I can't miss my queue!'

"He's an old acquaintance of yours, after all..."

My lips curled up into a smile, and I prepared myself.

"After leaving for so long, he finally returns..."

'Not yet... not yet...'

Holding in my laughter, I began to slowly move.

"... Won't you say hello to your old friend?"

'It's now!'

Rising from where I sat, I slowly turned to make eye contact with the girl, keeping my face low--considering her height--and smiled.

The moment she saw my face, her expression melted, and her widened eyes greeted me.

"Y--you're... J--Jared...?!"

My smile grew even larger, and I was grateful to Neron for the dramatic introduction.

'This is fun...'

"It's been a while..."

Silence, tension, and nostalgia filled the room as I gently stared at the blond loli in front of me.

"... Ana."

As we stared at each other, silence enveloped the room.

I initially thought it was dramatic that way, but, after a while, the silence didn't disappear. That was when things got awkward.

My eyes turned in Neron's direction, pleading for some assistance in driving a conversation. He started this, after all.

"I'm off to resolve the issue. Since the both of you have some catching up to do, I'll be taking my leave."

'Unbelievable! This guy actually--!!!'

Neron glided out of his office and whistled down the hall. The sound echoed until it became fainter and fainter--then it completely vanished.

Even after all that, there was still silence in the office. With no one willing to help out, I had no choice.

'Fine... I'll do it myself!'

With a determined expression, I took a leap of faith and spoke to the girl who seemed too shocked to move.

"U--uh... Ana... it's been a while..."

My voice seemed to snap her out of her daze, and she finally budged from her position

"A--ah! Yeah..."

Another awkward silence enveloped the room.

"... How have you been?"

It had been over a hundred years since I interacted with people normally. The only reason I was so free with Anabelle and Neron was that they were weirdos.

'I addressed the men at Alphonse's territory as their superior. This matter is completely different...'

Ana seemed like she had a lot to say, but was probably stuck in the same mental place I found myself.

'WHAT SHOULD I SAY?'

Perhaps I was overthinking it? Just as before, why couldn't I just talk casually to her?

'Yeah! Let's do that!'

"You haven't changed in the slightest, Ana."

"You've changed quite a bit, Jared."

Our voices overlapped, and our words mixed with one another.

'Ah, looks like she was thinking the same thing.'

This was the worst. There were so many things I wanted to talk to her about, but my communication skills had deteriorated so badly over the past years. Or was that just an excuse I was giving myself?

"Hey, do you want to... take a walk...?"

My eyes widened, and I looked at the girl who suggested it.

A smile was on her face, and her expression was already calm and collected. The bright twinkle in her eyes returned--though hidden behind the lens she used.

"Sure."

"Perfect! Let's head out, then..."

Surprisingly, as we started walking, it didn't take very long for us to begin conversing normally. I had been overthinking things!

"So, you're interning at the Research Facility of Ainzlark Academy? That's amazing!"

"Well, I did score the highest in the Scholars' exam. My project also caught the eyes of the superiors that they recommended me to the Ainzlark Research Institute."

I was amazed--no, impressed--by Ana's achievements.

"It's a good place. I'm given enough autonomy to engage in my own projects--though I'm sometimes dragged into group experiments."

It was so great that she was enjoying her internship. Another look at her, though, and I finally noticed growth in her.

'She's taller by a millimeter, I think...'

"How about the others?" I asked with a curious smile.

I had intended to ask Neron this question, but we somehow delved into the subject of Magic and were lost in it.

"Ah..." Ana's face clouded up a bit.

'I wonder why...'

"Before I tell you about everyone else, there's something I need to tell you first."

She suddenly stopped walking and looked at me with a determined expression. I made sure to halt in my tracks as well, and returned her stare.

"Jared, I... I had feelings for you a while back..."

'What the heck?!'

"... Did you know that?" Her eyes narrowed as she stared at me.

There was no use in lying to her, so I had to simply come clean.

"Yeah. I did."

'But why are you bringing that up now? And what's with the 'had feelings?''

"I see..." She mumbled.

'Did I say something wrong?' I couldn't tell at this point, so I just went with the flow.

"Well, when you disappeared, a lot changed. Of course, my feelings didn't vanish immediately, but... I..."

'Why does it seem like she's trying to tell me a dirty secret of hers?'

"... I... Kuzon and I..."

'What? What is Kuzon doing in the picture?'

I was just a bit curious before, but now I was certainly interested. What happened between her and that guy? Did he do something?

Kuzon's smug and easygoing expression appeared in my mind, and a shiver went down my spine. He was someone unpredictable!

'I didn't realize it back when I was in Ainzlark, but I finally remembered... the Midas Race!'

He was someone I considered a friend, but... things weren't so simple now that I knew his identity.

'What did he do to Ana?'

"... We kissed." The blond Loli finally confessed.

"..."

My mental faculties took some time to process what I had just heard.

Ana was blushing as I stared at her--most likely recounting the experience she had with the guy. My heart felt a huge burn, but I controlled myself.

'So... they've already...'

Why?

"Why are you quiet, Jared?"

Why did it have to be...

"Say something..."

Why....?!

"You're scaring me. Just say something!"

With clenched teeth, I finally let out the emotion that was swirling deep within me.

"Unacceptable...!"

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Chapter 317: A Girl's Thoughts

'Why is Jared acting like this?' Ana thought to herself.

Her emotions were still a mix, and she was very unsure of how she really felt.

The boy before her was her first love—someone who had saved her from her childish delusions. She owed a great deal to him, and even her emotions were tied too tightly to his person.

However, he abandoned her.

Jared didn't know how distraught she had been once he left. His decision impacted many people who were close to him—but did any suffer as much as she did? She had feelings for him, after all.

Though he had left behind instructions and means to carry them out, Ana didn't have any strength to do anything without him around.

Edward wholly concentrated on making himself more powerful, and her other friends suddenly got too busy.

She had never felt so alone amid company.

However...

... There was one person who was always there for her.

—Kuzon!

Kuzon didn't train all day. He was actually always free. And before she knew it, Anabelle began to converse more and more with him.

They shared fun moments together, and the hurt emotions she had for Jared slowly transformed into something beautiful toward Kuzon.

And then... on the final day of their First Year in Ainzlark Academy... the both of them kissed!

'He kissed me first!'

Feelings of guilt had rushed into Ana's heart—especially since she still had vestiges of feelings for Jared. However, she couldn't deny the warmth within her once their lips connected.

That was how they had parted ways as First Years.

Throughout the break, Ana kept thinking of it—of him!

Even as she practiced and studied, she never stopped.

The thought of seeing Kuzon again brought her great joy!

She worked extra hard on her Magic, and focused on all that Kuzon had taught her during their time together. Mixing both his and Jared's teachings, she was able to make phenomenal progress.

And so, by the time she resumed as a Second Year, Anabelle's growth could not be compared to the past.

Unfortunately, the one she wanted to see the most... was nowhere to be found.

Kuzon dropped out!

The heartbreak she received from that was so devastating that even now, she had the habit of rubbing her lips anytime her heart skipped a bit—or simply freeze completely.

To prevent any further distractions, Anabelle closed her heart and just focused on her research and growth as a Scholar-Mage. She refused to lose sight of her goal—to surpass Lewis Griffith!

She was able to come so far because of that single goal pushing her.

Loneliness crept in at times, but Ana remained strong.

Unfortunately... once again... her defenses were shattered when Jared appeared once again.

He had grown so much since she last saw him.

He was much more handsome, taller, and charming.

The intense shock made her freeze up, and her heart beat at a terribly fast rate. She didn't know what to say or do.

It was at this point that memories of Kuzon also appeared in her head. She felt guilty for having feelings for both of them—not certain why.

Even as they conversed, Ana couldn't completely shake off her guilt and complicated emotions.

Finally, after an internal debate, Ana decided to tell Jared about what she had been keeping from him.

—The Kiss!

His reaction was more than she had bargained for.

"... Unacceptable!" Was what he said.

'Does that mean he... is jealous...?'

Unsure of how to best interpret his obvious disapproval, Ana settled for that thought.

'Does that mean he likes me? Should I ask him?'

'NO!' She shook her head.

Fear of rejection, or even worse—acceptance—surged through her. If he turned out not to be interested, her heart would once again be broken—most likely beyond recovery.

However, if he actually felt the same as her, then... what of Kuzon? She had already kissed him and sealed their promise, right?

Could she really betray him?

'What if Kuzon returns someday, just like Jared?'

Would she be able to live with herself if he met her in a relationship with someone else?

'ARGH! This is too confusing!'

Her bright blue eyes stared at Jared, who was gritting his teeth in obvious frustration. She also felt bad for him, and her feelings couldn't bear to see him so hurt.

'Then... maybe...?'

If Jared was to prove himself to be more dependable than he was in the past. If he finally took an active position and chased her, then... she could consider being with him.

'YES! I'll give him another chance!'

If Kuzon appeared too, she would use the same criteria. Whoever was able to win in this game of love would have her heart.

A smile appeared on her face and her confusion dissipated.

Suddenly, Ana felt better than she had in years.

'I can't wait... to see how this ends.'

She adored the blond boy's face one more time, waiting for his answer.

'What's your next move now, Jared?'

'I can't believe this!'

While I was busting my ass practicing and training for the greater good, this girl and even Kuzon were busy goofing off in romance?

... That was unacceptable!!!

'How dare these little ones begin kissing at such an early age?'

Did they have no common sense?

War was looming, and I gave them specific instructions to get stronger before I returned. Yet... they were busy doing childish nonsense?

'Well, I suppose it's normal for their age...'

Ana was only just fifteen. Teenage romance and petty feelings were bound to pop up eventually.

'That Kuzon bastard... he should have known better...'

The worst part about this whole thing was that Kuzon abandoned Ainzlark Academy and didn't take full responsibility for his actions. Why were the Midas denizens such scumbags?

'Or was he a player?'

I had so many thoughts of dissatisfaction—almost as a father would have when his daughter was goofing off with the wrong boy at a premature age.

'I have been nurturing this girl... no one can take her until she's ready!'

Fuming as I made these thoughts, I grabbed Ana by the shoulder and drew close to her.

"Eeep!" I heard a sound come from her.

"I'll take that incident as a mistake..."

'It's a good thing Ana fessed up. At least she knows what she did was wrong!'

"... Please don't do it again!"

Ana's face was red, most likely due to her guilt. She nodded while staring into my eyes, showing me that she had learned her lesson.

'Whew! That went well.'

With this, my little Ana would be focused on the more important things!

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Chapter 318: Progression

"So, where did everybody else go?"

After the whole awkward exchange between the both of us, we delved into the topic of our classmates and friends.

"As you know, Kuzon and Stefan dropped out. While Kuzon didn't resume his Second Year, Stefan left after the first half of the same Year."

I could never fully tell what was going on in Kuzon's head, but I knew it was only a matter of time before he left Ainzlark.

In fact, it was better if he did so.

While the Academy was impressive in many ways, it was incomparably too ill-equipped to properly groom people like Kuzon—even me.

We were too powerful to be placed among regular students.

Our existence would dwindle the abilities of geniuses like Stefan and Maria, and their existence would also slow us down.

"I can understand if it's Kuzon, but..."

"Still hung up on that, uh?" Ana said with a smirk.

'Is she talking about how I lost to him? Jeez...' I blushed a little, scratching my head.

That was indeed one of my lowest points. But, considering my opponent was an integral member of the Midas Race, it was only natural that I would lose.

'His eye and hair color, alongside his phenomenal affinity for Mana... Kuzon is most definitely a Royal!'

"Just get over it. It's fine. You have a chance now." Ana spoke with a blushing face.

'She's right! I have a chance now...'

I had studied and trained hard for a very long time. Surely, our next fight would turn out differently.

"Thanks, Ana. I needed that."

The girl giggled, and then nodded as we kept walking. Before long, we returned to the topic of discussion.

"Why did Stefan leave, though?"

Ana shrugged slightly.

"I don't know. It came as a surprise to all of us. And he just happened to defeat Maria the day before he disappeared..."

'Stefan beat Maria? Wow!' My eyes widened.

Just how much did he train? No—could the gap between them have been covered by mere training?

'Hmmm... strange.'

"What of the others?" I asked.

"Well, most of us made it to the Ainzlark Hall of Remembrance," Ana spoke, trying to sound casual—most likely to hide her pride.

"Yeah, I heard. Good job." I smiled, patting her small head.

"H—hey! I'm not a kid, you know? You keep patting my head!"

'You look like a kid, though. So cute!' I mused, looking at the girl's pouting face.

"Y—yeah, well... with no one distracting me, I was able to get a spot in the Top Honored Graduates. The one who scored higher than all of us in our grade was Ed..."

'Hoh, Edward, uh? I wonder how he is now!'

"What of Ciara Epilson and Jerry Keller?"

"Hm? Oh, them..." Ana seemed surprised that I mentioned those two.

They were valuable assets, after all. Especially Ciara.

"Ciara got fourth place in the Ranking. Jerry got tenth."

'That's impressive! Tell me more!'

And so, she did.

Based on what she said, the Top Honored Graduates list pretty much went like this;

1. NIL NAME [Neron Kaelid, obviously]
2. Lewis Griffith [Me]
3. Serah Crimson [One chick I don't know]
4. Ciara Epilson [The crazy genius]
5. Edward Karl Leon [I'm so proud of this]
6. Anabelle Frederick [She scored directly below. Sweet!]
7. Maria Helmsworth [As expected]
8. Reed Sterling [Previous Headmaster of Ainzlark]

9. Damien Lawcroft [Isn't this a surprise? This annoying guy is still on the list?]

10. Jerry Keller [He managed to squeak in. That's good.]

It made me glad that the people of the past generations had been overshadowed by new individuals. I was certain that they would be proud as well.

"It's good, Ana. You've grown considerably since our last encounter..."

In just two years, this girl had already achieved a Silver Mana Core.

Her talent was phenomenal, and since she practiced with the aid of Magic Stones and Artificial Magic Cores, her growth was that much increased.

"Where have the others scattered off to, by the way?"

Ana was interning at Ainzlark Academy, but everyone else had been posted to various areas within the Kingdom. I was curious.

"Maria got a position at the Capital. Last I heard, Ciara was interning at the Northern borders—same as Jerry. Ivan went to the Western Borders."

'Oh, yeahh... I encountered him.'

"What of Edward?"

Ana smiled faintly, but her gaze seemed to be distant.

"He refused internship. He said he wanted to travel on a journey of solitude—and that he would return once he was satisfied with the result."

Why wasn't I surprised?

'Martial Artists never change, uh?' I grinned, remembering a certain someone's personality.

The fact that Edward was able to surpass Gawain's record in the Academy showed just how powerful he had become. Yet, that strength wasn't nearly enough for him.

"I see... it's understandable."

The Martial God Techniques in Edward's possession got extremely more complicated and destructive in the Advanced stage. It was clear that he needed some time of solitude to master them.

'I can't wait to see how he becomes once he returns!'

"What about you? Did you find what you were looking for?" Ana asked.

I nodded with a smile.

"Yes. At least, with this much... I should be able to protect everyone I care about."

My eyes met hers, and our gazes connected for a few moments.

'Ah, that reminds me... I still need to see Neron on 'that' matter.'

"I... see..." Ana whispered with a soft voice.

"We should meet up with Neron. He must have resolved the issue..."

The girl snapped back to reality once again, seeming to realize that we had taken a lot of time discussing.

"Y—yeah, you're right! Let's keep talking as we walk toward the Facility."

'That sounds fair.'

"Alright... let's."

And so, Ana and I kept conversing as we walked side by side—moving toward our destination.

I had to admit... it was fun!

The land was covered in blood and smoke.

Monsters that had surged from the vast ocean brought chaos to the immediate surrounding.

The surviving denizens had been evacuated—and those who remained on the wasteland were warriors.

A lady stood from atop a cliff and watched the monsters run rampant across the vast area they had already taken over.

The giant Demon Beasts breathed purple flames and shrouded the area in dense Miasma—a substance that was poisonous to her race.

Her pointed ears stood out, and the white hair she had danced with the wind. With her green eyes, she could only witness carnage—feeling anger and helplessness swirl within her.

'When will reinforcements arrive...?'

Watching and biding her time was all she could do.

Miasma was lethal to her people, and the best her regiment could do was create an encirclement to restrict the Demon Beast. However, even that wasn't going to last very long.

They needed assistance—desperately!

"Before it's too late... please come and save us!"

[SPELLCRAFT: Reincarnation Of A Magic Scholar](#)

Chapter 319: Maro's Office

Ana and I continued conversing until we reached the Research Facility in question.

Before we got there, I got the gist of what was happening, and who the guilty Professor was.

His name was Maro, and he was a bit enthusiastic about his work. While he was known to be incredibly brilliant, and was also a source of motivation for Ana, he was a recipe for disaster —especially thanks to his undying curiosity.

It was thanks to his achievements and deep love for Magic technology that he was chosen to give a presentation to the students this day.

'Too bad he messed up again...'

Not that it would make a difference, since Neron could just reverse everything.

We soon arrived at our destination — a tall building layered by several cadres of fortification Magic. I could also sense the effects of Neron's Magic as I drew closer.

Looking at the Research Center now, it looked as good as new.

"Looks like Professor Maro's mess has been cleaned up." I smiled.

Ana chuckled slightly, and we both entered the center.

I didn't have any clearance to proceed, but it appeared her ID was enough to allow both of us entry. Plus, once she mentioned that I was a guest of Neron, things went even smoother.

"Headmaster Neron should be on the fourth floor for Magic Engineering. I'm sure he's chastizing Professor Maro as we speak." Ana spoke as we ascended the stairs.

There were Teleportation conduits placed within the structure, but the fact that Ana used this means meant that she wanted us to converse a little more.

"When will he be done?"

"Hm? You have business with him?"

"Yeah. I mean... this whole thing interrupted our conversation, so..."

"Ah, that's true."

We both laughed, talking more until we reached our target floor.

"Alright. We're here." Ana spoke, opening the door to the massive room.

I was welcomed by the brightness that existed within the enormous place, taking in the sight of a room filled with all sorts of innovations.

'Not bad...'

The area was split into several compartments, and a good deal of Magic tools and technology could be seen. Automatons, Magic Items, Golems, etc.

"Like what you see? I'll show you my compartment later."

My lips curled up to form a grin.

"That would be nice."

"But first, let's get you to see Neron!"

"Maro, you nearly died this time, you know? I can't reverse death."

"..."

"And all for what? Why did you push yourself so hard once again?"

"I... I..."

"I mean, if you were the only one to get hurt, that would be fine. But... you dragged others to it."

"I'm... sorry..."

I could hear those sounds from my distance —before I entered the office of the Head Researcher of this area —Professor Maro.

'Neron sounds quite serious right now. Should I just wait until later? No... there's no time left!'

I had spent more than I bargained for.

Based on my calculations, I was supposed to be on my way to the Capital now.

"Let's go," I said to my partner, opening the door.

"A —ah, yeah..."

Her hesitation meant she was probably also reconsidering barging in on Neron's reprimand of Maro.

However, at this point, it was of little importance.

>CREAK<

The door opened once I got close enough to it —without having me twist a knob. I smiled at the good engineering and stepped inside the office, meeting Neron and the guilty Maro in a conversation.

One sat comfortably on a chair while the other was kneeling —head bent downward.

'Is that Neron?'

It seemed he was a different person when dealing with others as a superior.

As for the man —Maro —he was a lot younger than I expected.

'He's in his early thirties, maybe...'

The fact that he led a whole floor in the field of Magic Engineering was something that amazed me. Based on all Ana said, he was a brilliant person too.

'The last administration would never have allowed this. Does that mean Neron changed the system for Ainzlark's staff as well?'

I smiled and drew closer.

"So, you're the infamous Professor Maro..." I spoke, interrupting the unending back-and-forth between Neron and the man in question.

I was certain they had sensed me entering, but... neither even looked in my direction.

"Ah, Jared... you're back from your walk, uh?" Neron finally turned in my direction.

Maro followed his lead, and I finally saw his face more clearly.

He had ragged red hair, as well as a shanty cluster of short beards all over his chin. The bags under his eyes told me very much about his level of stress.

"A-ah, and who might you be?" He murmured.

"Well, I'm —"

"He's my friend and honored guest, Jared Leonard." Neron interrupted and spilled out my name.

The moment he did so, Maro's eyes bulged open.

"You mean, you're... the one who... the Jared who was..."

'Ah, he's referring to the Demonic Disturbance, uh...?'

>WHOOOOSSSHHH!<

Maro suddenly left Neron's front and rushed at me with maddening speed. If I didn't know he was harmless, I would have probably retaliated in some way.

"T-thank you very much!" The man bowed as he rendered gratitude to me.

'What the —?!'

Why was he thanking me? I didn't remember seeing him during my stay at Ainzlark. Or, did I rescue someone of importance to him?

"I heard from Ivan just how amazing you are. I'm his big brother, see..."

"Ohh, I see..."

They looked nothing alike. Other than the same red hair they both shared, Ivan and this Maro character were polar opposites.

"Ivan told me... what you did. If it wasn't for you, he would most likely be dead. He can be an annoying brother, but... I'm happy he survived."

'Hold on, does he mean —?'

"I spoke to him through our sibling communication line, and he told me about what you did at the Western Border."

'Ah, so that's what he meant.'

"It's fine..."

"What happened at the Western Border?" Ana was looking confused as she finally interjected.

My gaze went to Neron, and seeing no change in his expression, I decided to use my discretion.

'She'll find out sooner or later...'

"The Demons have begun their invasion."

[SPELLCRAFT: Reincarnation Of A Magic Scholar](#)

Chapter 320: The Exhibition [Pt 1]

"W-whoa... that's really... bad news..."

Ana sat, recoiling from shock caused by knowing the imminent threat approaching the Eastern Kingdom.

We had all taken our seats in Maro's office—even the offender himself. I would be hesitant to discuss issues like this with a stranger like him around, but since Neron vouched for his credibility, I decided to give him the benefit of the doubt.

"Is that tied to the reason you're here?" Neron asked me.

"Not entirely. I actually came to see you concerning a separate issue. Afterward, I'm going to the Capital to finalize matters."

"The Capital? You mean —" Ana exclaimed.

"Yes. I'm going to see the King and his court. Arrangements have already been made, so I should be granted audience tomorrow at the latest."

Ana and Maro especially looked surprised.

The whole purpose of giving instructions to the people at the Western fort was so they could deliver my message on time.

I even lent them Automaton so they could be quick. I selected a few that could move quickly, based on what their human bodies could handle.

That way, they could transport the corpses of the Demon Beasts I captured, and also deliver my message.

'Let's hope the King and his Council members aren't idiots.'

"I see..." Neron mumbled, looking at me with his usual stoic expression.

"So, when are you leaving?"

I shrugged a little.

"As soon as I conclude my business with you. It has to be private, though."

"Well, do you have an hour to spare before then? There's a little favor I'd like to ask from you."

'Neron, really? After telling you how dire the situation is?' I nearly heaved in exasperation.

"What is it?"

"There's supposed to be a special event today in Ainzlark Academy. An exhibition, to be exact. Maro here was supposed to prepare the tools he would use to educate the general student body on Magic and its evolution, but..."

"H-Headmaster Neron... w-what are you trying to do...?"

Neron ignored Maro's question and kept addressing me.

"... As punishment for his reckless behavior, I want to replace his performance with something else—something else."

'Ah, I see what he's driving at. Neron, you...'

"B-but, wait... it hasn't come to that yet —" Maro once again offered weak resistance.

"Zip it! You messed up. Admit it."

"I admit it, but isn't this going too far?"

"Too far? You nearly killed yourself... and others!"

"W-well, it won't happen again... I assure you!"

"This is the one hundred and seventy-fifth time you will spout that lie!"

'Jeez...' I winced.

Ana chuckled at the sight as well, blessing me with her innocent demeanor. Though I could tell that worry was hidden deep in her eyes.

'The Demon Invasion must be getting to her, uh?'

"In any case, Jared, I want you to organize something for the kids—an exhibition of some sort. Think you can handle it?"

I was well within my rights to refuse, but Neron knew I wouldn't.

Why?

I was curious.

'What kind of students has Ainzlark Academy produced?'

With a War at hand, it was to be expected that one would assess the military strength of even students. All our assets required examination.

"When does it start?" I smiled.

The sly bastard gave a grin, breaking his stoic expression.

"Ten minutes."

My grin became wider.

"Fine, then. Ana, think you can give me a tour of your section in ten minutes? I don't want to be late for the exhibition." I turned to my adorably flustered friend.

"W-what? You don't need to prepare?"

I tried my best to hold back any form of laughter. Ana was only asking out of innocence, so I was just going to let it slide.

"I don't."

"Hahaha! As expected of you, Jared. Well, don't let me stop you." Neron laughed.

I stood up with Anabelle and began leaving the office. Before I exited, I asked a question—still facing the door.

"Is it that same hall?"

For a brief moment, there was silence, and then;

"Of course."

"Very well. See you then."

As soon as Jared exited the office, Maro sighed and began grumbling.

"Are you still angry?" The calm man asked.

"Na. Just frustrated. I wanted to lead the exhibition..." The Professor murmured.

Neron shrugged upon hearing the words of his friend.

As unexpected as it would seem, Neron was actually a longtime acquaintance of Maro. In fact, they attended Ainzlark together, in the past.

Maro was Neron's junior, though.

"I have my reasons, you know? I'm sure Jared realizes that as well."

Maro couldn't argue with the words of his senior and superior.

Everything Neron did had a purpose—even back when they were still students in Ainzlark Academy.

"So, what's the reason?"

Neron's cool expression remained unchanged.

"Our quality of students significantly reduced in recent years. Since a good number of nobles now prefer to give their children sheltered and private education, thanks to the Demonic Disturbance, we had to give out scholarships and reach out to more desperate families and even made some slots available to common folks."

That wasn't the end of it, though.

"We had to lower our standards to allow more students to enroll here. It's affecting the quality of Magic Users, Scholars, and Martial Artists that we are producing."

Sure, Neron had reformed the system within Ainzlark, and the educational methods had been greatly improved. However, what good would that be if the students were not talented or motivated enough?

"Jared started out with having a mere White Mana Core Grade—even when he enrolled in the Academy."

"Y-yeah, I heard that. It's unbelievable that he has grown to such an extent..."

"Yeah. Exactly. He had no real talent or affinity for Mana. His current state is the result of tireless practice and innovative thoughts."

That was why...

"The students of Ainzlark Academy revere his existence as that of a powerful hero. His existence is highly influential for them. However, many forget the fact that he was once a powerless student like them. That's why... I want him to show them."

... It was a role only someone like Jared could achieve.

"For their growth, it's imperative we show them just what the right application of knowledge, determination, and skill can do."