

SPELLCRAFT 521

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

Chapter 521: The Cult's Assembly [Pt 3]

Kido Midas was a man who always got what he wanted.

However, there was someone he wanted above anything else—or at least, the power she offered.

"Just once. Please?"

"Nope. I told you, I don't do that anymore."

"Come on, just once. We'll both benefit as a result of your Original Magic!"

"Nah!"

"Just the tip?"

>POW!<

Every time, he troubled Karlia on having sexual intercourse with him. Of course, this was partially because he lusted after her body, but there was a much deeper reason.

Kido wanted more power—and Karlia was guaranteed to give it.

"Sigh, whatever. You'll come around eventually..."

"No, I won't. Now, we can continue with the meeting... right?" Her eyes especially glared at Beruel.

The Fairy King, who believed in absolute patriarchy was someone who would never be on good terms with a strong female like Karlia—especially considering how she was higher than him in rank.

He would have returned her defiance with violence, if he could. However, not only had he lost his authority as King, but he was also weaker than she was.

There was nothing he could do but sit down in silence.

Though Beruel felt an extreme loss for the death of his closest subordinate, there was nothing he could do at the moment.

Still, he swore to have his revenge—not only on the perpetrator, but also on those who dared look down on him.

"Now, then... since you're done with your little chattering, let us proceed with the meeting." The Cult Leader spoke.

"Now that our identity has been revealed, it's clear that the other party will begin to make their move."

Though it would have been preferable if they remained in the shadows, it was inevitable that they would eventually have to rise to the surface.

"We will be acting somewhat discreetly, but the time of our emergence has come."

As such, they would be taking more active steps to obtain their prizes. If they dawdled any further, the other side could take the initiative.

"For our goals, we can not afford to be sloppy."

Even though the members did not agree on much, this was something they were all strongly tied to.

Why else would they be an organized group?

"I'm especially thankful for two of our members who have shared so much information concerning the major threat that we are currently facing—the Eastern Kingdom."

No one would have expected that humans would offer so much resistance, but this was because of certain domino effects that went out of hand.

To outmaneuver them, while maintaining secrecy, the Organization had three members who were integral members of the Kingdom.

Damien Lawcroft was one of them, but he was now deceased, leaving only two left.

One of them was currently murmuring within himself as he grudgingly occupied the Seventh Seat.

Reed Serling, the man who was the previous Headmaster of Ainzlark Academy—as well as the third Grand Mage of the Eastern Kingdom.

Though he once belonged to the Upper Seat, he had been suffering demotion due to his stagnating power and limited use.

The second integral member of the Eastern Kingdom was not Legris Damien.

Sure, Legris had connections and a wide network, but his roots in the Human Kingdom were not as deep as the member in question.

"You'll be going against your people this time around. Hope you don't mind..." The Leader's eyes moved in the direction of the Fifth Seat.

Seated on it was a young boy who looked to be in his teenage years—not even an adult yet.

His black hair and deep blue irises were unmistakably pure, but there was no innocence left in those eyes.

His expression did not even waver once his previous home was called into question. He simply shrugged while speaking.

"I don't mind."

"Whoah! You've gotten so cold." Legris Damien commented with awe.

Even he was a rank lower than the boy who was snobbishly staring into blank space.

"You've changed from the boy I knew back in Ainzlark."

Once again, the boy ignored Legris Damien's prattling.

"I wonder what your cousin would think if she saw you like this. Hahaha, you've gotten so cool, haven't you?"

"That's enough, Legris. Let's just conclude the meeting. I have training."

"Sure, you do. Mr. Genius; Stefan Netherlore."

"Would you stop calling me that?"

"Nope."

"Then, whatever."

"Pfft. So cool!"

"Just cut it out."

"Nope. Hahaha!"

This funny exchange between a former Lecturer and former Student climbed until it reached an unbearable point for a certain someone.

>VWUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUMMMMM<

Once everyone fell under this pressure, they ceased their easygoing attitude and turned in the direction of the one who released the aura.

It wasn't the Leader. No, he was too liberal to do something like this, unless absolutely necessary.

The one who acted—releasing a wave of pure energy that dominated every Seat Member in the room—was none other than the First Seat himself.

With a short sigh breaking the silence, he looked in the direction of the Cult Leader and bowed slightly.

"It's fine. Let us proceed." The young boy responded, raising his hand slightly to show that he did not take offense.

"You'll all be acting independently, as always. We're a bit understaffed, but that shouldn't prove to be a problem at this point."

Normally, the Cult Leader would have preferred being steady about their conquest, but they ran the risk of their enemies gaining the upper hand if they didn't move quickly.

"There are Seven Arcanas left to be discovered. Every member, with the exception of the First Seat, will be dispatched to search for them."

Unlike before, there was no need for subtlety. This was simply a scramble for what would be a treasure hunt.

"The First Seat will remain here. Considering the fact that the enemy now knows the location of our base, it's imperative we have a strong defensive measure."

And, what monolith could be more powerful than the almighty First Seat himself?

"May I make a selfish request?" The very man raised his hand.

No one dared blink as he spoke for the first time in a very long.

He was one who believed that the need for words was not necessary when both sides had the skills to do the talking for them.

"It should take some time for them to prepare an appropriate number of forces to assault this place, even if they plan on doing it soon..."

What he said was right.

Thanks to the scramble for the remaining Arcanas, it was certain that the opposing forces would be diverting a great deal of energy to finding the legendary items.

It was doubtful if they would have enough leeway to launch a full-scale assault on the Cult.

"I would like permission to survey an area that caught my attention before the war began. I sensed a strong surge of energy there and I would like to see if I can find what I'm looking for there."

Abandoning one's duty would be considered very bad behavior for someone who stood at the pinnacle of the Seats.

However, everyone knew better than to argue with his request.

"Very well. Do as you please. How long will it take?"

"Nothing more than a day."

"That's reasonable. Return in a day's time."

The First Seat bowed.

His hilt shook as his back bent, and the kimono he wore slightly shook.

His show of humility was a testament to how much character he possessed, and he was the only person who did not bear any resentment toward any other member, neither was he an object of anger for those gathered.

Everyone either respected him, or felt neutral about his existence.

"I wonder what will happen to the unfortunate soul who will suffer at the hands of your Martial Arts."

Everyone in the room chuckled.

But, they knew very well that their Leader was serious in his comment.

The First Seat was a Martial Artist—a Swordsman that had gone beyond transcendence.

"Well, then, I'll make sure to watch out for the display of your power one more time... Legendary Blade God."

Once again, the swordsman bowed.

His shaded auburn hair fluttered with the stale wind in the room as he continued his practice of silence.

"Alright. We've delayed enough. Let's finalize our discussions on our plans for the future..."

Every member smiled and nodded in approval.

First Seat: The Legendary Blade God

Second Seat: Kido Of Midas

Third Seat: Karlia The Succubus

Fourth Seat: Fairy King Beruel

Fifth Seat: Stefan Netherlore

Sixth Seat: Legris Damien

Seventh Seat: Reed Sterling

Eight Seat: Vaizer

Ninth—Twelfth Seat: Unoccupied

"... Our goals are right in front of us."

And so, with the agreement of every member in the room, a new dawn of chaos was born.

For the Arcanas that they sought in order to achieve their respective goals, the overwhelmingly powerful beings decided to rise from the shadows.

It was time for the Nether Cult to emerge.

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[The Fifth Arc: Emergence Of The Nether Cult, Begins]

This will contain a lot of twists, a lot of mysteries, a lot of unraveled secrets.

I certainly hope you enjoy this Arc as much as I enjoy writing.

Get pumped, and get ready.

It should be the best Arc thus far.

Thanks to everyone for reaching this point in the story.

Let us journey to the end together!!!

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

Chapter 522: Research

"This is serious..."

My eyes were fixated on the two in front of me.

What I had heard was surprising—so much so that it took a significant amount of brainpower to process it.

As my eyes frolicked about, their gazes were on me, expecting an answer.

"I never expected this... not this soon..."

Was it my fault? Did I cause this too? No... I couldn't blame myself for something like this. It was somewhat inevitable, considering the circumstances.

I just didn't think it would be like this.

"So, you're saying..." I raised my eyes and stared at Neron and Serah—the two people seated in front of me.

"... You want to get married?"

"Yeah!" Of course, the first person to voice her opinion was Serah Crimson.

Hearing her affirm those words just made me shiver once more.

"But... why?"

Not that I was against their happiness or anything, but the timing couldn't have been any worse.

It was not only crazy, but very irrational. I looked at Neron for support, however—

"I also agree with Serah."

—He gave the same answer.

"Hehehe!" The crimson lady grinned in victory.

The Neron I knew wouldn't make such a decision without a valid reason.

I needed to find out the truth, so I decided to use Telepathic Magic to speak to him.

~Did she force you to do this? Are you being held hostage?~

He slightly shook his head and sighed.

~No. It's what I want. Life is short, you know?~

What the heck was this man talking about? He literally had all the time in the world, yet he chose to seal the deal now?

I mean sure, I was the one that pushed him on this path, but weren't things going way too fast?

'It has to be the work of Serah! She's too excited about this.'

"Hey! Are you guys communicating through Telepathic Magic? That's rude!"

Inasmuch as I would have loved to defend myself, she was right.

The only thing Neron and I could do was apologize.

"It's not like we're having it anytime soon, you know? It's in, like three months. If we hurry with this whole Cult issue, we should be able to be ready by then." The crimson mage added with an emphatic sigh.

Did this woman really know what she was saying?

An organization that took years of their time gathering Arcanas in secret, having members powerful enough to topple the world, yet she was giving a deadline of three months?

I knew it! Serah Crimson was batshit crazy.

"How is research going on your end? It's been two days since you eavesdropped on their conversation and they figured it out... any progress?" Neron smartly changed gears, most likely noticing my expression.

"No dice. Finding out about these guys is just impossible. The density of power there was crazy, so I could even barely hear them—talkless of seeing how they looked like."

The tracker worked, though, so I knew the location of the enemy's headquarters.

Still, storming it was another matter entirely. For all I knew, it could be a trap. Since they would now be expecting a strike, it was risky to go all-out against them—especially since Arcanas were the priority.

"I sent some Automatons to survey the area, but they were all shot down before they could report anything. The last thing they saw was just an endless sea, though."

The enemy was located at the epicenter of the world. Exactly in the middle—surrounded by the four continents.

Still, why hadn't we noticed such a place before? Even I didn't know what to expect from the place at this point.

"They probably have a very powerful cloaking field. As for your Automatons, maybe an automatic defense mechanism... or someone is guarding the place vigilantly." Neron calmly said.

All the Automatons I dispatched were the best at stealth. They had [Unknowable] active, but it seemed that wasn't enough to escape the enemy's surveillance.

"Why did they choose that location, though? There has to be a significance. It could have to do with the fact that they're gathering Arcanas..."

It probably wasn't world domination —considering they would probably succeed at that with the amount of Arcanas already in their possession.

Then what?

"I've been researching Arcanas long before now, so I know a few things. Still... there's a lot I haven't figured out."

At this point, it was back to the drawing board. In a race against time, such as our current predicament, mistakes weren't allowed. If I was to win this time around, I had to be smarter.

"They have their ways of locating Arcanas, but there are conditions for every Arcana one collects. That's also one of the reasons they slowly collect them."

It was somewhat like a game, where the supposed maker of the Arcana set a few traps and a roundabout layout to ensure that it wasn't easy to obtain the Arcana piece.

My friends and I almost died thanks to a couple of the more troublesome games we had to play.

Ultimately, we succeeded in obtaining all our prizes... well, almost all of them.

'I wonder if I'll be able to do it now... that one we couldn't get.'

It had bugged me a lot in the past, and I had postponed it even in my current life. Considering the difficulty, it was understandable.

However, I needed to get it sooner or later.

'I might as well start from there.'

"You mind if I join you on your research for the Arcana's location?" Neron offered.

Not that I didn't appreciate the help, but wasn't he too busy being buried in Serah's boobs to care about the fate of the world?

"Don't look at me like that, Jared. You... you don't know how they feel. You wouldn't get it." His response caused my heart to bleed, but I tolerated it.

'Joke's on him. In my past life, I had my share of fun!' Of course, I was still a virgin in this one, but I could still relive my past glory.

"Well, if you want to help, it's always appreciated." I smiled, looking at Neron's excited face.

"Alright! I'm pumped up!"

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

Chapter 523: Happy Reunion

"Ed!!!" Ana's small body jumped on the very muscular person in front of her.

His tan skin and hulking body made him appear to be way older than his age, but he was only fifteen years old.

"It's been a while, Ana."

Edward, even with his hardened look, gave a soft smile as he returned the embrace of his dear friend.

Though, since her body was so small in his grasp, and she seemed so fragile that he could snap her like a twig, Edward maintained caution.

"I've missed you! You missed out on a lot of action!"

It was currently twelve days since the end of the war, and a lot had happened since then. It was crazy how Edward wasn't present in any of them.

"I had a little errand to run for Jared. Is he around?"

Both of them were currently within Ainzlark Academy's grounds.

While Ana was wearing her usual lab coat, shirt, and skirt, Edward donned a simple traveler's cloak.

He had nice trousers, and his boots looked sturdy too.

However, he was bare-chested, causing his skin to glimmer in the morning sun.

"Yeah. We've been expecting you. Everyone is waiting." Ana smiled.

Edward smiled and nodded.

His eyes scoured the massive compound, and he couldn't help but feel a wave of nostalgia. It had been a while, after all.

"Let's go!"

Ana did the most amusing thing--climbing on Edward's broad shoulders while holding his head and pointing far into the horizon.

'Eh?' It had been a while, so Edward had almost forgotten about this habit of hers.

Even as a kid, he did it often. It was probably why he was able to develop such a strong back.

"Yeah, yeah." Now feeling a bit self-conscious thanks to the stares of students and staff around him, Edward kept his head low and began moving.

"Faster," Ana yelled, causing him to quicken his pace.

This continued until he was practically running.

"Edward, my man!" Jerry Keller hugged the buff guy.

He too seemed small in his embrace, but it didn't matter at this point. Despite their respective height or size, they were still friends.

"Still hugging people at your age? Hmph!" A dissatisfied voice rang beside him.

It belonged to the brunette called Ciara, and she was certainly not pleased by Edward's closeness to Jerry.

She acted like she didn't care, but if anyone looked at Ciara closely, they would see that the girl was observing the two's closeness and gnashing her teeth.

Jealousy was such a mysterious thing.

"Hey, Maria... how have you been?" Ciara finally found a way to distract herself as she went to the young lady.

"Edward, look how much you've grown." Ivan guffawed as well, feeling quite intimidated as he approached.

The young man had been working out to increase his muscle mass, but he was nowhere close to the beast in front of him.

"Are you sure you're fifteen?" He spoke his thoughts aloud.

Edward could only laugh awkwardly.

Perhaps he overdid it a bit, but all he did was adhere to his training regiment whole eating a lot of monster meat.

He hadn't noticed just how big he had gotten until he met fellow humans.

"Haha..."

The room everyone was currently in was a lounge reserved for honored guests at Ainzlark.

Currently, it was something like an alumni meeting--but only for the small circle that Jared invited.

"Where's he, though?" Edward looked around him.

Currently, the people present were; Ana, Ciara, Jerry, Edward, Ivan, and Maria.

They weren't expecting anyone else except the host of the meeting. And, as always... he was fashionably late.

>VWOOOOOMMMMM<

The wide door, serving as both entrance and exit, was flung open.

The man of the hour appeared, accompanied by a good number of familiar faces.

And, among them was a beauty unlike any other.

Edward found his heart fluttering as his gaze was cast on her.

He lost himself in the sight... and for a moment, the only thing that occupied his mind was the girl beside Jared.

'W-who is that...?'

"Sorry I'm late, everyone." I walked into the very room where my friends were waiting for me.

I didn't come alone, of course. Neron, Serah, Maro, Aloe Vida, and Lemi were accompanying me.

Knowing how my daughter was, I made sure she was sticking close to me. That way, she wouldn't cause too much trouble.

"This isn't exactly a reunion call, but... it's nice to see everyone after so long." I smiled.

One way or the other, I had made independent contact with them.

I even assigned Edward a task in secret, and for everyone else, I had given them something to do--one way or the other.

"Whoah, Edward... seeing you in person really hits it home." I smiled, looking at my buff friend.

He was even taller than Neron, at this point.

His gaze was on someone else, though. The moment I saw his distracted eyes and charmed expression, I looked beside me and noticed that Lemi was also staring at him--or rather, his body.

My brain went into overdrive and put two and two together, faster than the speed of light.

'Edward and Lemi? What the heck! How?!'

It didn't help that my daughter had my wife's expression, so seeing her gawk over Edward's body made me feel weird.

"Ahem, as I said, it's nice to meet everyone. However, I'm here concerning a serious matter, so... let's all have our seats."

Fortunately, Edward finally took his eyes off Lemi and gave me a guilty look after I glared at him for some time.

Maybe I sent the wrong message to him--and it looked like I was hoarding the girl to myself--but that wasn't the case at all.

I wasn't interested in Lemi that way, but... imagining someone else with her--especially my very good friend, Edward--was tough.

I wasn't the only one glaring, though.

'Shit... I haven't told Ana yet!' My mind rang, noticing her dissatisfied expression.

Feeling uncomfortable, I slightly glanced in Maria's direction, but I was met with a nonchalant demeanor.

No--she didn't even seem to pay me any heed. She was busy discussing with Ciara.

'Well, that's good... I guess.'

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

Chapter 524: The Winning Team

In any case, this was an official meeting. The sooner it started, the better.

With that in mind, I implored everyone to have their seats, and after organizing an introductory session, I finally declared my reason for bringing everyone together.

"I gathered all of us here for one major reason... and that is because of a new threat that has emerged."

The whole act of the Demons was a mere prelude to the emerging darkness.

At the very least, I wanted to protect my own. But, more than that, it was within my rights to squash the enemy's side.

The problem was that they were a group, and so another group was necessary to combat them.

In essence, to stop the Cult, I needed to work with a team.

"Everyone, I need your help."

Neron, Serah, Lemi, Maro, Aloe, Edward, Ana, Jerry, Ciara, Maria, and Ivan.

With me in the mix, we made twelve individuals—enough for the kind of effective group I intended on managing.

'Looking at their abilities, there are better candidates I could have employed...'

People like Ivan and Lemi weren't even very strong. However, they made considerable progress daily.

If this would help them in their advancement, I was fine with having them on board.

"So, what do you all say?"

'Well, this is good.'

I was currently on a wide expanse, watching my dearest friends lay out before me.

The good news was that they all accepted the request, but the not-so-good issue was that a majority of them were still considerably lacking in many ways.

That meant I had to set them straight one way or the other.

"I teleported us to this vast field for a reason." I was sure many of them would recognize this place.

It was the same spot where we battled the Demons not too long ago.

Since it was located on the outskirts of the Eastern Empire, it was perfect for the kind of activity I had in mind.

"Out of everyone here, I'm exempting only Neron, Maro, and Serah from this exercise."

Well, I was planning on simulating a sparring experience, and adding those three would have been too unfair.

For one, Neron and Sarah were too strong. As for Maro, he was more into engineering than combat.

It wouldn't do any good by making him actively deviate from his area of expertise.

The remaining eight; Ivan, Maria, Ana, Edward, Lemi, Ciara, Jerry, and Aloe were going to be my primary focus.

"We're here to train. Or rather, I want to test your capabilities."

During the war, I had the chance of observing some of them, but none were pushed to the point of displaying their limits.

If we were to go up against monsters on par with Legris Damien, I needed to be certain that my team could keep up.

"You'll all be facing a single opponent. I want to see how you'll fare."

I wasn't trying to insult them by putting all nine against one target, but this was simply the way I knew to balance things.

"H-hold on, I'm fighting too?" Lemi interrupted me with an entitled yelp.

'Ah, yes... I forgot.'

This girl didn't have any combat experience.

'Well, she's gotta learn sooner or later.'

I smiled sweetly and my daughter and gave an emphatic nod.

"Your Aunt placed me in charge of you. We're friends, you know?"

"B-but, this isn't friendship! You're just—!"

"It's friendship. I'm doing this for your own good. Isn't that what friends do for each other?"

"W-well, it's not exactly like—"

I could spot Edward smiling like an idiot as he watched Lemi throw a fit. Something about his face glowing pink made things feel terribly wrong.

"Alright, enough dawdling. Let's get down to business." Ignoring Lemi's pouting, I floated to midair.

"Who will we be fighting, though? You?" The statement came from Ana.

Her glare still hadn't vanished—most likely because of the just-concluded exchange between me and Lemi.

"Really? We'll be fighting Jared?!" Edward's eyes lit up in excitement.

The boy had grown even more to be a battle maniac. He resembled Gawain now more than ever.

'Martial Art idiots...!' I smiled at my muscle-brained friend.

"Isn't that too unfair? It's eight against one, but still..." Ivan looked hesitant.

He probably didn't want to fight me.

"I don't see what the big deal is. I'll knock him down myself." Ciara made a defiant tone.

'What's with the attitude? It's not like I forced her here...'

After Jerry agreed to join the team, she did the same. To be honest, I wasn't very close to the girl, but I realized her potential.

It was a shame that she didn't seem the least bit interested in being friends with me, but for some strange reason, she was always involved in my affairs.

'Is it because of Jerry? Hmm...' To think of it, back in the Academy, she was also quite fixated on him.

The best course of action would be to ask Jerry all about their relationship later on. For now, though...

"Don't say that, Ciara. You don't know how powerful Jared is."

"Yeah... he's simply amazing."

"Aloe, don't patronize him too much. You sound like a fangirl."

"What's got you so prickly today, Ana?"

"Alright, I'm pumped up!"

"I've never fought before, though..."

"Don't worry, I'll protect you!"

"....."

After watching them all converse for a few, I clapped my hands and regained their attention.

"You won't be fighting me."

It seemed they were misunderstanding many things.

But, that was also fine.

"Your opponent is one of my constructs." At this point, I could make out many disappointed gazes assailing me.

Those with a lot of pride would have even felt insulted.

"It's my best Automaton. If you guys manage to defeat it, I'll fight you myself."

Before they could complain, I snapped my fingers, and the platinum-armored being appeared.

"Everyone, meet Gawain—the Ultimate Automaton." I smiled sweetly.

The being beside me was floating too, and his majestic form took in the gazes of everyone. Thankfully, a few more of them were now interested in fighting the thing.

"Alright then. You may begin on my count."

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[A/N]

Some people have asked, so here we go.

[Discord Link to my Server]

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

Chapter 525: Automaton Vs Humans [Pt 1]

"He's mine!"

The first to make his move was Edward.

Immediately Jared declared the match to have started, the hulking being sharply dashed in the direction of his foe.

>VWUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUMMMMM<

Perhaps it was to impress the girl he had laid his eyes on, or maybe he was simply in a hurry to test out his strength on this new opponent.

Instantly creating a blade from the Mana he exuded, Edward smiled as he wildly dashed.

However—

"Too slow."

—Even Edward couldn't react to what came next.

The Automaton's hand was already close to Edward's face before the boy could say a peep, and its metallic blow was planted on his face faster than he could process.

>BOOOOUMMMMM!!!<

Edward jerked backward, completely stunned by the Automaton's initial attack.

And then—

>BOOOOOOUMMMMM!!!<

Another kick from the platinum armored being sent the boy's hulking body flying away until it crashed into the ground beyond the remaining seven.

His descent caused a crater, devastating the area around him in an instant.

"Who's next?" Gawain, the Ultimate Automaton, folded his hands as he waited for the next challenger.

"T-two hits... he got rid of Edward in just two hits?"

There was always the possibility that Edward was simply weak, but no one doubted the bulky boy's strength.

The fact that he was able to move faster than everyone else showed just how capable he was.

Yet, the Automaton was faster.

"We better take this serious, everyone." Aloe sighed, now coated in complete light.

Golden orbs glimmered around her, and a witch's hat sat atop her head.

Her dress was pure gold, and her skin radiated energy. The woman had wasted no time before entering Mage Mode.

"I'm not done." She murmured.

"[Original Magic: Aurora Vidalis]."

Instantly, ruptures in space appeared, and darkness began to spread.

No—it wasn't that everywhere was getting darker... it was something completely different.

Right in front of Aloe, a sphere was forming. Within it were beautiful glimmers of light, like stars. They kept getting brighter as everything in the vicinity dulled.

"What are you doing?" Ciara asked, looking agitated.

"You don't need to know." She sharply responded with a smile.

No one knew the true nature of her Original Magic, but what she was doing was absorbing all the light around her—using the orb before her as a magnet.

This made everything around her slow down, and her speed greatly increased.

Of course, this affected everyone around her equally, so her allies and the enemy would still be on equally balanced terms when it came to speed.

Other than mere swiftness, Aloe had collected enough power to transcend her limits. The orb in front of her served as a second Mana Core—one that mimicked the effects of a Special Grade.

In essence, it had no limits.

Having dual Mana Cores—one being Gold Grade, while the second being Special Grade—made Aloe's power skyrocket beyond any normal degree.

In both speed and power, she had reached a transcended height.

Still...

"Not yet!"

... She wasn't satisfied with this.

"Fusion Mode."

Aloe called upon her familiar—a Golden Wisp that danced atop her head—and the two fused together.

>SHIIIIIIINNNNNNGGGGGGGGG!!!<

It all happened so fast, but the results were dazzling.

Aloe now took on the appearance of a goddess—similar to a blinding sculpture of golden brilliance.

This was the result of using Mage Mode, Original Magic, and her Fusion Mode.

The Sphere that served as a second Mana Core floated above her shoulder, and her body was bursting with power.

With everything around her slowed down, and her own capabilities reaching new heights, Aloe Vida was confident in her victory.

"[Grand Blitzing Ray]." Rather than dispersing energy in a wide sphere of explosion, Aloe concentrated everything in a single direction and sent it charging at Gawain.

'My current speed far exceeds the speed of light, and he should currently be slowed down.

>VWUUUUUUUUUUSSSSHHHHH<

The ray decimated everything in its path, turning the ground itself into char and molten magma as it raced to devour the target.

However—

"Not a chance."

—Gawain's hand stretched out and absorbed the blast directed at him.

>FSHUUUUUUUUU<

Every single ounce of golden energy—that was supposed to decimate the Automaton—was instead taken in without even the slightest resistance.

"W-wha—?! How?"

"You don't need to know."

Gawain sharply moved, closing his distance with Aloe in a flash.

Its body now radiated a golden aura, adapting Aloe's Light Magic as his own.

>BOOOOOOOOMMMMM<

Despite being flustered, Aloe easily evaded Gawain's attack by virtue of being faster. She rained down more Spells on the Automaton, causing it to dash around as it evaded every strike.

Whirring in retaliation, it summoned several blades and launched them in Aloe Vida's direction.

>VWUUSHH<

Unfortunately for the Automaton, the woman was fast enough to deflect each and every blade with her Magic.

"You're good," Gawain commented, now emitting greater power than before.

Aloe felt her opponent's energy rise, but she was determined not to lose her focus.

'You can do this, Vida! He's watching you!'

With that, the young woman calmed herself and steadied her Magic power, ready to return whatever resistance her opponent would give.

Still, no matter what it was, Aloe was determined to emerge victorious.

>VWUUUUSSSHHH<

Gawain's form changed—he too entered a state only Mages could adapt.

"T-this is—!!?" Aloe's eyes bulged at the occurrence unfolding before her.

As if it wasn't surprising enough that Gawain could move so fast even with her Original Magic's effects, it was now adopting a mode powerful state.

"Mage Mode?!"

>BOOOOMMMMMM<

With its newfound strength, Gawain summoned several more blades and added multiple volleys of Magic Missiles and projectiles to the mix.

These means of attack littered the sky where Vida was currently floating, surrounding her on all ends.

"There's no escape, and your defense's integrity has its limits."

>WHOOOOSSSSHHHH<

Without wasting time, every single blade and projectile was launched at Aloe. Of course, she erected a strong defensive barrier, but sooner or later, it would break.

"Shit!" She gritted her teeth as she glared at the Automaton who also eyed her with a strange sense of animosity.

"Of everyone I've fought... you're the strongest." Gawain's voice warbled as it spoke.

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*

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[A/N]

Some people have asked, so here we go.

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

Chapter 526: Automaton Vs Humans [Pt 2]

No one could have known this, except it and its creator, but if not for the power of Spellcraft, Gawain wouldn't have been able to move so freely.

That was how dangerous Aloe Vida's Original Magic was.

Even with its speed, Gawain was unable to catch up to the woman.

The only thing it could do was surround her with enough threats, so she could be still for a moment.

'You're too cautious.' Gawain had been assessing his opponent since the start of their fight, and this was his conclusion.

If only Aloe Vida was more proactive and brutal in her assault, he would have been far more pressured.

"You lack enough violence."

With those words, he increased the level of projectiles he sent, and also their numbers.

"Tch!" Aloe Vida clicked her tongue as she was overwhelmed by the sheer numbers that seemed to push her to her limits.

Her barrier's integrity plummeted, and Gawain sharply moved to deal the finishing blow.

"Damnit!" Aloe managed to dodge his strike, even while being incapacitated in midair, but she could not have predicted what came next.

>BOOOOOOOOMMMM!!!<

A sharp blast was launched from behind her, enveloping the young lady in bright golden light—the same kind she had sent to Gawain not too long ago.

"Gahhhhhh!!!" She screamed in both surprise and pain, plummeting to the ground after suffering her loss.

Gawain heaved an imaginary sigh as he stared at her defeated body.

'I had to wear out her defenses and then use Spellcraft to catch her off guard. This lady is strong...'

Her problem was simply the lack of enough combat experience.

Not only was she sloppy and overly cautious in battle, but her Original Magic was also far from complete.

There was a lot to work on.

Gawain imagined how much potential she would have if she had the same sort of battle intelligence as its master.

"That would be frightening..." Gawain laughed, now looking in the direction of his remaining foes.

"Ah, I guess you guys were still around." The Automaton's voice warbled with every statement it made.

"It makes no difference. Come at me at once." Now flexing its hand and gesturing them to move closer, Gawain seemed to be provoking the remaining targets.

Unfortunately for them... it worked perfectly!

"Haaa... haa..."

All of them were down for the count.

Only the Automaton stood victorious, and not even damaged in the slightest.

As it watched everyone grovel on the floor, the being decided that it had completed its task and was about to return to its master.

But...

"We're not done!"

... A voice stopped him.

"Oh? I guess you're up now." Gawain glanced in the direction of the rising challenger.

"I guess it's about time you woke, considering you charged in first... Edward."

The auburn-haired buff was currently frowning.

Someone was in his arms—her black and white hair trailing as the wind blew.

"You... hurt her, didn't you?" Edward glared.

Energy seemed to burst from within him as he didn't let go of the unconscious Half-Elf.

"Not really. She fainted due to shock. I didn't even touch her."

"O-oh... I see."

Things just got awkward, since Edward was about to fight on behalf of the girl and justice. But, now that it had come to this...

"T-that doesn't matter. You caused her distress. Besides... not to make an excuse, but I wasn't in full form then. Let's fight with no holds barred."

Edward donned a wild smile and released his energy, finally.

"I'll be needing you for this, Perci!"

~Understood~ Edward's Dullahan Familiar responded.

>BOOOOOOOOMMMMM<

The sudden outburst of energy caused the air to undulate and several pieces of debris to fly.

Purple flashes mixed in with white light, and the contradicting energy swirled around Edward's body.

>FWUUUUUSSSHHHH<

Instantly, the boy was shrouded in dark armor—similar to the Automaton's look, and his frame was exuding power.

His white hair partially leaked out of the helmet he wore, and both light and dark energy radiated around him.

"Fusion Mode, Martial State" Edward mumbled.

He had combined two immensely powerful forms, and now his power had reached a precipice.

"So... you want us to fight with no limiters, uh?" Gawain murmured, looking at the foe he was going up against.

"Very well"

>BOOOOOOOOOOOOMMMMMMM<

Space seemed to break as Gawain also let out the fierce energy that was within it.

Pure shire power surged from its armored body.

A white blade appeared on its hand, and several white orbs danced around it.

The climbing energy it had dominated the atmosphere, and it stared at Edward with resolve.

"Martial State. Plus Mage Mode. And then, Fusion Mode."

"Uh?!!"

"I have access to all three forms... so I suppose we have revealed our cards now," Gawain spoke, brandishing the blade it wielded as it approached Edward.

The Martial Artist was stunned that the Automaton he was fighting had attained Martial State despite being so proficient in Magic.

Mage Mode and Martial State at once... how was that even possible?

Plus, since it could use Fusion Mode, that meant it had a Familiar as well.

Edward couldn't believe the absurdity of the situation, but he calmed himself.

No matter who his opponent was, it wasn't like he would lose his nerve.

Besides...

"Isn't this what you wanted? An opponent to stimulate you!" The boy smiled underneath his armor.

Also brandishing his purplish-white blade, Edward readied himself for the action to come.

~There's something you should know, Edward.~ His familiar chimed in.

"What is it, Perci?"

~...~ For a moment, there was silence in Edward's inner realm, but it only lasted for a brief moment.

Afterward, the deep voice of his Familiar returned.

~If you fight that guy... you'll lose.~

Edward's smile did not cease despite hearing that. No, he smiled even wider.

"It doesn't matter. I want to fight him!"

Unlike the time with the Demon General here he achieved such an easy victory, this was a fight where he had to exert himself to the max.

Even if victory wasn't in sight he would push himself to the limits and evolve further.

That was how Martial Artists grew!

"HAAAAAAAAA!!!" With a surge of power exploding within and without, Edward roared and dashed in Gawain's direction.

'I'll fight to keep getting stronger. Until...!!!'

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

Chapter 527: Constructive Criticisms

"Looks like it's my win."

"Yeah..."

Edward and the Automaton stared at each other. A moment of silence emanated between the two immensely powerful individuals.

The environment could testify to their strength, as it was completely wrecked.

"In the end... I couldn't land a single hit..." Edward laughed, looking at the armored being floating before him.

Unlike the latter, the former's armor was as good as gone, and blood covered a great deal of his body.

He had definitely been through a lot, and he tried his hardest, but...

"I didn't know the gap in power would be so vast."

... Ultimately, even Edward couldn't win.

"Do you all understand now?"

My defeated friends were now seated before me, completely mellow after suffering absolute defeat at the hands of Gawain.

Neron would have reversed time to make it as though their wounds never existed, but it was better to just heal them.

They grew a great deal from this exercise, after all—well, almost all of them.

'Lemi, that girl... she's the oldest among them, yet she acted like a baby on the battlefield.'

While I couldn't blame her, I definitely wasn't satisfied with what I saw.

'I'll need to drive some sense into her.'

What was it called again? Tough love? Yeah, it was best to be even stricter with her.

And, let's not forget the stunt Edward pulled in the battle—how he carried MY daughter like some princess and brought her so close to his chest.

It could have been my imagination, but I was sure she was smiling when that happened. They were supposed to be training, yet...

'No, Jared. Not now. Focus on what you have to do...'

"Compared to a single Automaton, you couldn't win."

"You're talking as if this isn't the state-of-the-art weapon of mass destruction..." Ana chimed in, rolling her eyes.

'What's with the attitude?' I wondered.

Was she still mad about the whole Lemi stuff? Well, I planned on telling her about my lack of interest soon anyway.

'Just be patient till then, Ana.'

Returning my gaze to everyone before me, I gave the analytics of the match.

"Edward, you were too impatient." If he had just stayed more-level headed, he wouldn't have been knocked out so quickly

Even Lemi lasted longer than him initially.

"Aloe, you were too conservative."

If she had been a bit more reckless and violent in her assault, she could have achieved more results.

Not only did she have the advantage in speed, but her destructive powers were also a very big deal.

I was sure she would be able to land a couple of hits on Gawain.

The only problem was that he superior to her in durability.

"Ciara, you were stuck for some reason."

"H-hey, what could I have done? Original Magic doesn't work!"

It seemed Ciara was used to handling many enemies with her Original Magic, so this time she was unsure of what to do.

'I'm sure she's at least on Edward's level when it comes to power, though...'

Why did she lose, then?

"Jerry, you became flustered after Ciara lost, and you went down soon after."

After he lost, he plummeted on Ciara's body and remained there for most of the match.

"Hmm?" I noticed Jerry's face turning a bit pink.

'Eh? What's going on?' Ciara was smiling as she stared at the flustered young man, and I felt like she was sending him a message via Telepathic Magic.

'I can't deal with this right now...'

I turned in Ana's direction and also criticized her lack of active battle ability.

Her excuse was the lack of appropriate tools, and it seemed she heavily relied on preparation when it came to fights.

"While I can understand the need to utilize tools and an active battle strategy to win, certain situations don't allow that. You should be able to think on the spot and transform a situation to your advantage."

Of course, she only murmured and argued further.

'She's really upset today...'

My gaze turned to Ivan, whom I gave a simple criticism to.

"You're lacking in power. That's the only thing I see. You have extremely good battle senses, and you make very good use of the Magic at your disposal. But, you're too weak." It sounded blunt, but it was the truth.

"I see..." Ivan was frustrated, no doubt.

It wasn't fair, the fact that he was working so hard but his limited potential made him behind everyone else.

There was a limit to what he could achieve in a lifetime.

He would probably never reach the level of certain monsters.

'Which is why I won't ignore things this time.'

"Maria was very good with everything, except skill and tact. Your fights are similar to Serah Crimson, especially how you use absolute power to crush your opponents."

While that was all well and good when it came to battling weaker enemies, in a battle between equally matched individuals, the one who emerged as the winner was the person with more skill.

In essence, just as I was able to beat Serah, it was possible for a weaker person with better strategy and skill to win against Maria.

Thankfully, she took her criticism well—I think. An emotionless face and a light nod was all the reaction I got from the girl.

'Cool, I guess...'

"Lemi... I have no particular comment for you. You were awful, through and through."

"You're so mean..." She pretended to break down, even staring at Edward for some reason.

"Ah... erm..." Good thing my good friend, Edward, knew better than to take her side.

Sure, Edward was a muscle-brained person, but I was glad he still had more loyalty toward his friends than a random girl he just met.

"All in all, you were all standard—no, even above average in your fights..." Of course, when I said that, I wasn't including Lemi.

She wasn't even on any playing field.

"But, that's just when compared to regular people. You might all be powerful out there, but this is the big league. You are all less than average in here."

With monsters like Neron and Serah in existence, there was no telling what cards our enemies had to play.

Besides, they even had Arcanas—nearly making them invincible.

Our current team stood no chance.

'It's risky, but I have no choice. I better start with this small circle...'

The only way to win was to increase our chances of victory.

'Time to teach them something new.'

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

Chapter 528: Preparation And Surprise

If I was to judge the strength of our group, and give a proper ranking on our members, then...

'First would obviously be Neron. Then, we have Serah. I come in after that, and after we have...' I looked at the rest of our members.

In terms of pure ability, Aloe Vida seemed to be the most powerful.

It was a tough pick, but I would still place Ciara over Edward.

Not only did she seem distracted during the sparring lesson, but Gawain was an Automaton, so her mind-based Original Magic had no effect.

If she was to fight with Edward, I could only imagine the damage.

After Ciara and Edward, the next was Maria. Her power was more than I bargained for—almost similar to Serah.

For someone who looked so gentle, I never expected her brute force to be so immense. Still, though...

'Brute force isn't enough...'

I could tell that, due to the circumstances, some of our members couldn't exhibit their full capabilities.

For example, Ana didn't have her aids with her, Ciara couldn't rely on her Original Magic, and Maria seemed to be holding back on using her Original Magic.

'Serah already told me she has one, so why didn't she use it?'

I decided to let it go, probably because it wouldn't have made a difference, anyway.

After Maria, the next would be Jerry.

He had improved considerably, especially since the last I saw him.

'He's proof that constant practice works wonders...'

Taking last place were Ivan and Lemi. Based on potential alone, my daughter should have ranked a lot higher, but she was just too green.

'And, she did faint when the moment of truth arrived...'

Ivan ranked the lowest when it came to combat potential, and he had no worth in other departments as well.

Bluntly speaking, he was the least capable member.

As for Maro, his value didn't lie in Magic Combat, so he wasn't even a part of the ranking.

Normally, I would have relegated Lemi to that role as well, but she was capable of so much more.

There was no way I would let her waste her potential in a lab.

'Ah, am I being too overbearing?'

There was the tendency of being too hard on her since she was my daughter. But, it was simply because I cared.

"Well, this is all I can say for now," I spoke to my audience, breaking down my observations.

I noticed Ivan's face clouding up again, but I wasn't going to stop because of that.

Everyone had shortcomings—even me.

I recently lost to the enemy because I wasn't prepared enough. I was just as hard on myself as I was on my teammates.

"Despite all I've said, though... I still need everyone's help."

I realized it already—that I couldn't win by myself.

"But, not like this. We still have a lot of work to do. There's a lot of room to grow."

That's right! It was time to evolve once more.

"I've been doing some thinking, and I would like to help everyone achieve the next step of advancement."

After observing them—both individually and as a collective, many flaws came to my notice.

It was time to rectify that.

"We have limited time. I want to wrap this up before the wedding in three months... oh wait, my bad."

Widened eyes and surprised gasps escaped everyone as they stared at me, and then traced their attention to the only people amid us who could be considered prime suspects.

"Jared!" Serah yelled, and I profusely apologized.

Neron said nothing, but his silence was received loud and clear.

'He's giving that dangerous smile... I'm in so much trouble.'

Me and my big mouth!

"A-anyway, we have limited time, and the enemy will definitely not be waiting for us to get stronger before making their move."

That was why we needed to hurry. There was no time for practice or training.

Inasmuch as it didn't sound ideal, the best course of action was a method that guaranteed quick growth.

There were a few things that came to mind—one of which was the use of Magic Items.

Other than that, though... something else surged in my thoughts.

'I should teach them how to increase the power of their Familiars as well.'

Usually, a Bond Soul only had a fraction of the power they possessed when they were still alive.

What I did to Kahn—and even my other Familiars—was to restore the lost parts of their Souls and make them whole.

That way, they had the same abilities as in their prime.

'If I show them this, and also give them Magic Items, their powers are sure to rise...'

But, that wasn't enough for me.

'It's time I revealed this to them... the concept of multiple Mana Cores.'

For people like Ciara and Serah, whose Mana Cores had limitless potential, such knowledge would be useless.

However...

'This is a chance, Ivan... you can overcome your limits and grow stronger this way.' I smiled at the young man.

Jerry would also be able to push past his limits, and the others were guaranteed exponential growth.

'As for Spellcraft... it's not time yet.'

Inasmuch as I wanted my allies to be a force to be reckoned with, carelessness was a deadly foe.

'I trust them, but...'

They weren't skilled enough to hide the Spellcraft technique, unlike me. Anyone who was skillful in sensing Mana would be able to perceive the use of Spellcraft.

It was only after years of practice that I could mask it, but they didn't have that luxury at this point.

In short... they weren't ready for it.

"Edward, you have what I asked you to get, right?"

"Yeah. I kept it where you asked me to."

"Perfect. That's the edge we'll have over our opponents." I grinned happily.

Some confused stared greeted me.

"What's in the book?"

"Well, let's just say it's—" I was still speaking when I was assailed by an unexpected sensation...

... PAIN!

"—Guark!!!"

My body suddenly felt a strong sensation, and I clutched my chest tightly.

It felt like my insides would burst, so I went to my knees instantly, fighting indescribable agony.

"ARRGHHH!!!"

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

Chapter 529: Grim Shock

"Heuk!"

My body throbbed, and I couldn't speak until I was done absorbing the shock that seemed to tear me apart from the inside out.

I could hear panicky voices around me, and their surprised faces came into my blurred view.

"Do something, Neron." Serah's voice rang out.

"I can't. It's affecting his Soul... there's nothing I can do about that."

That's right. I understood that much, which was why I knew I just had to wait out the storm.

'But, it hurts! This backlash is too much! Arhhhh!!!'

My eyes were tightly shut and I gritted my teeth as my Soul suffered continuous shock. Making sure my breathing was steady, and my internal flow was unhinged, I endured the pain.

'H-how... how could this happen...?!'

"Haaa... haa... I think I'm all better now." I smiled weakly, looking at the crowd that had formed around me.

Some people looked more worried than others—even Ana, with all her initial pouting, looked very devastated.

In contrast, Ciara merely stared at me coldly—almost as though I was a spectacle, or maybe an interesting lump of meat.

I already knew she didn't really care about me, but still...

"What just happened, Jared?" Serah was the first to speak, as the others were still recoiling from surprise.

I was plunged into sudden pain, and this would probably be the first time any of them had seen me struggle so much.

I sighed, rising to my feet.

The pain had vanished, now replaced by a vast emptiness that would take time for me to adjust to.

"It was a Soul Shock, right? Something happened to your inner self... but how? We're you resonating with something? No, it shouldn't have been that severe, unless..."

As expected of Neron, he deciphered what was going on with me in an instant.

'Just how good are his sensory abilities?' I looked at his stoic face.

"Well, something a bit more severe than that..." I murmured.

I was currently downcast, overwhelmed by a multitude of emotions. However, for me to fully make sense of what had occurred, and also for everyone to understand, it was better for me to go somewhere first.

"Let's put a hold on this meeting, for now. There's something I need to see."

"We're coming with you!" Maria's voice almost overlapped with mine as she stared with resolve.

"Hey, speak for yourself." Of course, Ciara just had to speak up.

Her objection was met with a light jab from Jerry, causing her to yelp.

"H-hey!"

Seeing them interact like this made me feel better—if only a little. However, the heaviness in my heart couldn't be alleviated by something so simple.

"You guys should all come with me. I'm sure you'll find what you're about to see... quite disturbing."

With that, I brought out a Spell Card and activated the Teleportation Magic stored within.

'It's best I don't use much Magic for a while... just to stabilize my condition.'

There were probably not going to be any problems, but I didn't want to leave anything to chance.

Not anymore.

>VWUUUUSSSHH<

We vanished, and in a spark of blue, appeared in a completely different location.

It was... at the center of a crater.

"W-what is this place?" Someone behind me murmured, but I ignored their question.

Bending down, I felt the heat of the ground with my hand.

'It's still warm... this just happened...'

The scene looked like a meteor fell from the sky, and the crater was as large as a massive city—bigger than even the capital.

"This landscape... those mountains... isn't this place—?!" Serah spoke, her voice climbing as she looked around her.

"So, you recognize this place." I smiled sadly.

The mountains around were already broken down, and the lush vegetation that once added life to the area was now gone.

It was just an empty, vast wasteland.

"What happened here? Isn't this the Beast Kingdom?"

My sadness grew deeper.

"What do you think?" A dark glint glowed in my eyes.

Maria and the others who followed me here during the last expedition all had heavy expressions on their faces.

"T-this place...?"

"H-how?!"

"No way..."

No one would believe it at first glance too, but I was certain.

"What exactly happened Jared? Is this what caused your Soul Shock?"

I nodded, answering Neron's question.

"I made a contract with the Beastfolk, as you know. When they died, the Soul Brand I placed on all of them was forcefully severed."

The problem was that it happened all at once, causing the 'Shock' to be too great to handle.

"Ah, I see... so their Souls were destroyed at once."

When Neron put it that way, it suddenly made me realize just how terrible such a thing was.

"Souls dissipate after death, but... there are certain attacks that are directed at the Souls. That seems to be what happened here." He stepped forward, analyzing the situation.

"Yeah, you're right. But, who could have done something like this? Could it be the work of an Arcana?" I asked, still conflicted.

The population of the Beastfolk was not small. They were in the thousands, and they had numerous species under one banner.

It was difficult for me to imagine a person doing something like that without an Arcana.

"It doesn't necessarily have to be an Arcana. I can probably achieve something of this scale, but in a different way..."

Usually, Neron's Magic only affected physical matter, and the Soul was incorporeal. His Time Magic had no effect.

That was why, even though he reversed the state of a person's body, their memories didn't revert.

It was the same way he could place himself in a Time Loop, yet, he wasn't experiencing everything in that same vein.

"If I reverse a person to a point of non-existence, it would probably have the same effect as killing a soul," Neron murmured.

"How much Mana would that take?" I looked at him.

"For one person? It depends on how long they've lived. Beastfolk have an approximate age of thirty-fourty years, right? It should take a few hundred Cores for one..."

For a population like this, though... just how much power would Neron have to expend?

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

Chapter 530: Immersion

"It would probably take about fifty to sixty percent of my stockpile..."

'That's an awful lot!'

To others, sixty percent might have seemed like a reasonable amount of power--perhaps not even plenty enough--to wreak this level of havoc, but...

'Neron has the highest pool of Mana I've ever seen! It far exceeds anything in the level of common sense.'

For someone to deal the same level of damage as what would require sixty percent... I was honestly frightened.

"Of course, that's because the process is complicated. If it's just blowing stuff into butts, then it shouldn't take that long. The problem is..." Neron gazed all around him.

"... This place seemed to have been blown to bits, so it's most likely the work of an explosion."

But, an explosion that could get rid of the Souls and Bodies of the target--especially on this scale--had to take a vast amount of energy.

"The device you built, Jared... I checked the specs. It could have been capable of something like this, right?"

"Ah, yes."

I made sure not to use that function, though. It would have been a waste to let all the Demon souls perish, rather than just absorbing them.

"But, that's only because of The Sun Arcana. That's why I think it has to be the work of one."

"Not necessarily. Arcanas didn't come from the gods, you know? They were made by people. If people made them, it also goes without saying that they are capable of performing something to that effect."

Neron's reply shook me, but I had to admit that he was correct.

"We shouldn't make any assumptions. That'll only cause us to arrive at the wrong conclusions. I understand that you're agitated and shaken currently, Jared. I'll be your voice of reason here."

"T-thanks..."

Neron closed his eyes and inhaled, taking in the atmosphere--or probably extending his sensory function.

"There's a survivor."

"What?" His sudden voice shocked me.

"Over there. There's a survivor." Neron pointed in a particular direction.

>VWOOOOOOOSSSSSHHHHH<

Serah raced there, and in an instant, she returned with someone in her hands.

"Y-you are--?!" I was surprised to see the boy.

It was Asa, the son of Beast King Gerard.

"Y-you guys... you came... you came...?" The boy sobbed, staring at us with his wide blue eyes.

His blue hair fluttered slightly, and his body didn't stop trembling.

'He's the kid I healed of Mana Burst.' I watched as he kept crying.

How could I not have sensed him? No, wait, I couldn't sense him that time in the bath too.

'Becoming one with the elements... that's what he said, right? Is that how he survived?'

"Tell me what happened here, Asa!" I swiftly approached the boy, desperate to know the truth.

"That's enough, Jared." Neron sighed.

"The boy just went through a traumatic experience. Everyone and everything he knows has vanished, and they're probably never coming back. This level of extensive damage--that killed both body and soul--is probably too much for my Time Magic to restore."

I stopped and reasoned with Neron's words.

"Even your Hanged Man requires at least one element--body or soul--so there's no way to revive them now."

I understood what he was saying.

"It's best we leave him be. Maybe have him rest... he looks exhausted." Neron sighed.

"I-I did my best... I hid like you wanted, father... I--I... I did good, right? I did...."

"Yeah, you did well." Serah soothed him with her hands as she carried him.

The boy cried some more as he hugged the Grand Mage. To be honest, my heart bled for him... for his people.

But, that made me all the more determined to know what the heck happened.

'It's the Nether Cult. It has to be! They struck again... I wasn't expecting it to be this fast!'

"... Hic... hic... B-but... even though I hid. Even though I became one with the Elements... he still... he still found me! That man still found me!"

'What man?!'

Asa was dropping clues, and I couldn't let this chance go to waste.

"What man are you talking about, Asa?" I asked, my eyes widened.

I could feel many disapproving stares greeting me, but I didn't care.

Everything was counting on me, so I had to know more to handle the situation. The last time, I lost because of the lack of enough information.

There was no way I could lose again! Not to Legris Damien or anyone!

'I thought that, yet... they got me again.' The frustration I was feeling, added to the need for more knowledge, caused me to ask with ferocity.

"I... I... I couldn't see it clearly. I just... hicc... hicc..."

Asa broke down further, making the situation grow from bad to worse.

"Just go to sleep. Rest now." Serah placed her hand on Asa's head, causing him to cease his cries.

His eyes slowly closed, and before long he had drifted off to sleep.

"...."

There was silence for a whole, and we all stared hard at each other, alone in the vast wasteland and trapped in a mystery that couldn't be solved.

"You realize that even if he wakes, there's a chance that he won't be able to accurately answer your question," Neron said calmly.

I shook my head, refusing to believe that our only hint would be useless.

"She could use her Magic to probe into his head." I looked in Ciara's direction.

"H-hey, it doesn't work that way!" Ciara was most likely making excuses again.

"There's a limit a child of that age can retain in his memory. Besides, the mind naturally rejects pain, so he may unconsciously forget a lot of the details." Neron added.

Everyone around me was making sense. I knew that much. But, why didn't they understand...

'We can't fight what we don't understand. If we do... we'll lose!'

"There's also the possibility he won't be able to help, even though he saw the man. What do you expect him to say? That he saw the man use 'this' or 'that' kind of Magic? He's still a kid. His perception is probably going to differ from what you'd construe as useful." Neron touched my shoulder and gave me a soft smile.

"We should just do what we can do on our end. Don't despair, Jared... I've got this."

"Uh?" I looked at Neron with a dumbfounded expression.

"The energy I'm feeling here is different from what I'm used to, so that's why I was a bit hesitant at first... but I want to try something."

'Try something? What is he talking about?'

"You know about my [Timeless World], right? Well, I've combined that with [Reversal]. I've created a new Spell."

My eye widened slowly, finally grasping what Neron was implying.

"I'll be inserting myself into the stream of time and I'll see what exactly happened here in the past."

"W-what--?!"

When did Neron achieve that level? If he could do something like this, then it was possible to...

"I call it [Time Immersion]"