

SPELLCRAFT 541

SPELLCRAFT: Reincarnation Of A Magic Scholar

Chapter 541: Arcana Of Power

Neron seemed to have it all.

Power, looks, talent... the list went on.

Sure, I was more innovative in many ways, but even without me, Neron seemed to be able to do whatever he desired.

Most of all, even though I had faltered many times, he never seemed to make a mistake. He was always calm, unassuming, and completely dependable.

In addition to his power and love for Magic, Neron was able to balance a life of romance... and he was soon going to get married too.

It made me realize...

... Just how empty I was.

Watching Neron also got me thinking.

'If he could balance all of this alongside having a partner... shouldn't I be able to do the same?'

But, I knew the sad truth, and the difference between me and him.

'Neron has no limits. He can do anything. He can achieve both Magic and Love...'

Only one of the above could be mine. Wasn't that the truth?

"You also want what he has, Jared. That's the truth."

Maybe Aloe was right. She did seem more experienced in that field than I was.

Plus, she had told me about many of her escapades. Since she was pretty, many guys had come after her.

That was why I could take her word for it.

"Even amid so many people, you are lonely... isn't that right, Jared?"

'I... I'm lonely?'

I wasn't sure, but... I did feel empty.

Even with the adventures and discoveries I was having, it all felt meaningless when no one was willing to interact with me.

If it hadn't been for Aloe's company, then, what would I be doing?

The words of Alphonse and Serah echoed in my heart, and it hurt slightly.

But, I couldn't deny it any longer.

"Yeah, you're right..." I smiled sadly.

Aloe Vida was right, and she knew that. Her smile calmed me, and I was grateful we had this conversation.

"... I truly am lonely."

Aloe and I finally stopped conversing after I was done analyzing the Arcana before us.

It was the genuine thing. That brought relief to my heart, in more ways than one.

'My comrades and I didn't try our hardest in vain.' A tear nearly dropped from my eyes.

I had also analyzed the energy around the Arcana, and while even I couldn't completely decipher it, I knew it wasn't harmful.

"Time to claim our prize."

Now floating in midair, I made my way to the floating card and felt a strange energy envelop me as I drew closer.

Something was unraveling the closer I got to the card, and as I stretched my hand to retrieve it, I could feel my vision getting blank.

Still...

'I'm so close.'

... I kept pushing.

Finally, my hand came into contact with the Arcana, and I was suddenly thrust into a brand new world—at least my mind was.

>FSHUUUUUUUUU<

I felt myself ascend to another plain, feeling lightheaded and somewhat disoriented. My vision was somewhat blurry, but I was in a room of white.

No one was present in the very large expanse except one person.

He stared at me with a somewhat concerned expression, though I couldn't make out his face well.

'W-who's that?!' My thoughts peaked as I felt unfamiliar energy around me.

It didn't feel bad, though. No, it was the opposite, in fact.

Everything around me felt so pleasant.

"You... you're a Singularity, aren't you?" A voice called out to me.

'A Singularity? What's that? Who was this man, and what did he know?'

The conversation I had with Legris suddenly popped into my head and I remembered that the Organization also referred to me as that.

'Is he from the Organization? Did they attack? What's going on?'

"I see. You can't speak well or interact freely here. Your connection to Aether must be very limited. Your soul is in a peculiar shape too. What's this? It's so different... interesting."

'Who is this guy? He's saying stuff I don't understand.'

"Ah, apologies for the delay. My name is Merlin. I'm the leader of the 21 Apostles of Aether. You could also call us the creators of the Arcanas."

'Creator of the Arcanas? I was standing in front of someone like that right now?' Never before had I desired to speak as badly as this moment.

So many questions flooded my mind, but I couldn't speak.

"The one in your possession is the Arcana Of Power, also known as [Strength].

I made it myself as a symbol to define what true power is, and the challenge you encountered is proof that the road to achieving power is impossible and unending."

If he knew it was impossible, why did he create such an elaborate scheme?

"But, I'm glad you were able to reach this point. Neither the weak nor the powerful are worthy to obtain 'Strength'.

Only those who refuse to give up will eventually receive what they seek."

Merlin's smile broadened a bit, and now I saw compassion on his face.

"As much as I would like to stay and speak more, time is up. I left a fraction of my soul behind to speak to you, and the message is almost concluded."

'Wait! I have so many questions!!!' My eyes pleaded as I watched the man with flowing hair slowly vanish.

"Use the Arcana wisely... and moderately. One last thing, though, as both a warning and a request."

Merlin's voice suddenly became stern, and I saw a serious look on his face as it vanished.

"Please... stop Ciel. Whatever you do, make sure the Nether doesn't return. If not..."

I watched him return to particles, but his enduring voice lingered, resonating with my heart.

"... This world will perish."

Instantly, a bright light shone and I found myself sinking back to the ground, utterly confounded by the revelation I received.

'This world... perish...? Nether? Ciel? What is... going on...?'

I closed my eyes and heard my name mentioned a dozen times—it could have been more.

However, as I felt so exhausted that I lost consciousness, Merlin's words still resonated in my heart.

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Chapter 542: Outside The Labyrinth

"U-urhhh..."

I slurred, regaining consciousness slowly.

'I can't remember the last time I felt so lightheaded and drowsy.' My mind wandered as the blurry images of everything around me started getting clearer.

"... Uh?" My eyes finally regained sight, and I realized that we were no longer in the Labyrinth—or at least, I wasn't.

'Wait, this place is...'

"You're finally up." Someone murmured beside me.

Silver hair flowed with the breeze, causing me to glance in the direction of the owner of the voice.

"M-Maria...?"

The girl's eyes wandered elsewhere, as though intentionally avoiding eye contact with me.

'Come on...'

"How are you feeling?" She muttered once more.

I couldn't tell whether she was upset, shy, or worried. Her expression looked blank, and her blue eyes looked distracted.

"Y-yeah, I'm good. I feel much better now. Where are the others?"

Now rising from my previously laid state, I looked around. Maria and I were definitely in the Green Forest where the Arcana's monument was located.

But why were we outside, and where were the others?

"E-er, they wanted to explore more of the Labyrinth, but then you fainted. So..." Maria didn't look in my direction as she spoke.

The girl's gaze was on the floor—and her cheeks were flushed pink.

"... They decided that someone should watch after you, outside, while they went on to see what else we could find in the Labyrinth."

"I see..." I murmured, rubbing my chin.

I doubted there was anything else we could find in the Labyrinth, though.

'Still, it's not impossible. Since the owner is a Mage, with knowledge and stuff we've not seen before... maybe he left them behind?'

Suddenly, an image of the man I spoke to appeared in my head.

What did he say his name was again? Merlin? Just who was he?

"E-erm..." Maria's voice became a bit more erratic, and it seemed I was missing something.

"What is it?"

"Could you... put on some clothes...?"

"... Eh?"

Why did I only notice after Maria told me?

"What? Why am I naked??!"

"W-well, after you grabbed the Arcana, everything you had on you was torn apart. We tried to outfit you with something else, but as long as that Arcana was in your grasp, nothing worked." Maria explained.

"A-ah..."

I noticed the Arcana in my right hand, glowing and warbling.

The card's multicolored glow drew me in, and I found myself marveling at its beauty. The image ingrained in it was that of a maiden and a lion interacting—which further reminded me of Merlin and the words he told me.

"Every cloth we tried either bounced off, or was consumed. We decided to just carry you out and leave you until you regained consciousness. But, since someone had to watch over you... I was chosen."

"I see... but why you, though? Ivan or Jerry would have been more suitable. They're guys, after all." At this point, I had used Magic to create a barricade between myself and Maria, so she wouldn't see me naked.

The next thing I did was to reach out to my special subspace to find the right attire to don.

"Well, they all wanted to explore more of the Labyrinth. No one wanted a role as boring as keeping you company."

"Not even Edward?!"

My goodness! I didn't know I had traitors for friends. Who would have thought that they would give Maria the responsibility of watching over a naked me?

"Ah, Edward wanted to volunteer... but... in the end, he was more than happy to go along with that Half-Elf you're always with."

"What?"

My eyes widened instantly and I realized what happened.

'Those bastards...!!!'

Without my supervision, they decided to let loose, didn't they? How could I have let them out of my sight!?!

"I was the last choice, so it was decided that I would watch over you. Of course, I didn't do anything weird to you, or anything. I also... didn't see anything."

Somehow, I found that hard to believe.

There were a lot of holes in Maria's story, and I noticed her tone felt inconsistent.

'Guess I'll have to ask Neron or Aloe... what exactly happened.'

"Thank you."

I brought down the earthen barrier that separated us, leaving nothing between the two of us.

At this point, we unintentionally made eye contact, and I found myself being drawn into her eyes again.

"... For what?" As her lips parted, I felt oddly excited.

Memories of our kiss replayed in my mind, and something else began to rise.

'No. Not now!!!'

"W-well, for watching over me. You could have had fun like everyone else."

"Well, you're right. It's not every time you get to explore a Labyrinth as vast as this one. Plus, it did seem like a lot of fun."

'Urgh! Now she's making me guilty.'

"Haha, I see. I'll make it up to you, then."

"Yeah, you better. I was scarred by watching over your naked body too... do you know how much I've suffered?"

'Hold on, what's with this switch in tone?'

"Wait, didn't you say you didn't see anything?"

"That's beside the point..."

What the heck? How was that besides the point? Did she really see something?

'I've been sensitive of my... stuff... ever since Jane commented on it. Did she really see it? Oh crap!'

To be fair, it was a young teenager's junk, and she was practically an adult at this point. If anything, she should have been the one guilty of sexual indecency, not me.

'I'm the minor, after all...!' Using that excuse to justify myself and quell the embarrassment within me, I sighed.

"You have to take responsibility, you know?"

"Uh?" I glanced at Maria, and her expressionless face was staring directly at me.

It seemed so creepy and overwhelming that she was staring so intensely at me. I didn't hate the feeling, but... I was beginning to get worried.

"Jared..." Maria began to move closer.

'Wait. Wait. Wait.'

"... Remember our last conversation?"

My skin tingled as I recollected the incident.

'Is that... is that what's going to happen again?'

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Chapter 543: Hostile Interruption

How could I forget that experience? Maria basically forced me on the bed and—!!!

'Don't tell me we're going to do that again?!'

I didn't want to admit it, but the thought of that got me excited. Still...

'Not here! If anyone sees us—!!!'

Unfortunately, it was too late. I wasn't fast enough. My legs were too weak too. It wasn't my fault that I couldn't resist.

I just... wanted it over with quickly.

"Then, if you remember... then can you make your decision more in my favor? Just consider it. That's how you can take responsibility." Maria's hand brushed my cheek as she spoke.

My eyes widened as I felt her sincere smile wash over me. It felt... completely different, and my heart began racing at an unbelievable speed.

'N-no way...!'

She was so close to me.

"Just think of me a little more... that's all."

"I un—"

"Shhh..." Her finger was on my lips at this point, and I found myself unable to move.

"Do you understand, Jared? Not Aloe Vida. Not Ana. Not Lemi. Not Ciara. Think about me..."

I understood why she would say that about the others, but why did Maria even mention the last name?

"I'm just being thorough." As if she read my mind, she answered.

"You're pretty cute when you're flustered, you know?"

"A-ah...!"

I didn't know Maria was so good at flirting. If I was being honest, she was far better than Emilia.

'So that last time wasn't a fluke. But, this is too... how did she become so intense?!'

It is said that everyone had dual sides to them. Was this the part of herself that Maria had been hiding from everyone else?

Rather than the prim and proper young lady, this teasing girl was almost a total stranger.

Still...

... I didn't dislike it.

"Thank you?" I managed to leak my voice out in a squeak.

"You're welcome!"

With that, Maria backed off a little, giving me a little breathing room.

'That was... intense!'

>BRRRMMMMMMMM<

The Arcana in my grasp suddenly resonated with me, causing me to look at it for a moment.

"What is this...?"

My eyes flashed at it as it kept warbling and beeping incessantly.

"Why is it doing that?" Maria drew closer once again, also curious—most likely.

As we got closer, I felt an intense surge of emotions... and something else.

"H-hold on—!"

But, it was too late at that point.

>BOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOMMMMMMMMMMMMMMMMMMMM!!!<

Suddenly, light descended upon both the boy and girl, immersing them with its terrifying might.

As the heated wave cascaded over them, razing the entire area in the process, someone hovered in the air with a satisfied smile plastered on his face.

His pointed ears perked out of the long silver hair he possessed, and the beautiful multicolored wings behind him displayed his splendor.

"Sickening..." He whispered, condescendingly glaring at the crater he had formed thanks to his attack.

This entity was none other than Beruel, The Fairy King.

"They got their guards down, so I could easily strike. Just who are those idiots..?"

Frankly speaking, Beruel had been watching them the blond and silver-haired humans for some time now.

He could have struck at any moment, but he thought they could at least give him some information before ending their lives.

After listening in for some time, he discovered that the human boy was indeed in the possession of a newly discovered Arcana, and that the other members of their company were not preset.

Wasn't it the best moment to strike?

But, the humans started acting indecently, causing the Fairy King to hesitate.

It had been a while since he witnessed such a sight, so that was probably why he didn't attack immediately.

However, there was a limit to everything. Soon, Beruel got sick of the humans—perhaps even himself, for watching their obscene display of affection from a distance.

How low the Fairy King had fallen.

"Now that I've taken care of the scrubs, I should go down for my prize... though this is secondary..." Beruel murmured, but soon after he said that, he noticed something peculiar.

"Oh? They're still alive?"

>VWOOOOOOOSSSSSHHHHH<

The thick cloud of smoke cleared suddenly, displaying the boy and girl at the center, completely unharmed.

"Oh? Is that the Arcana's doing? Didn't I catch them off-guard?"

Beruel had several questions, but they could wait.

Since his initial attempt to eliminate the two didn't work, he could try his next approach.

"Greetings, humans..."

Beruel's voice echoed across the vast area as he stared beneath him.

A sizeable portion of the Green Forest had been engulfed in his Light Magic, leaving the couple standing on a barren crater.

"... I certainly hope you enjoyed my warm address." The Fairy King spoke in his usual grandiose way, referring to the blast of Magic he had sent their way.

"... Uh?!" The male human's voice burst out, and he seemed quite surprised.

'Heh. Is this the first time this one is seeing a Fairy? Well, even if he met one, he hasn't seen one of this size before, I guess. Plus, unlike the others, I am most elegant...' Beruel flapped his Fairy Wings with pride as he condescendingly gazed upon the human scum.

"Now then, know your place and—"

"Aren't you Beruel? What the heck?!" The human's voice burst forth, displaying both confusion and a bit of annoyance.

"Wha—?! He knows my name?" Beruel was genuinely shocked.

"Hey! What the heck, man? You can't just go around blasting people! What in the world? What if we had gotten hurt?"

Beruel felt strange.

The inferior human was shouting at him in such a manner, yet he spoke in an overly familiar way.

Beruel couldn't remember the last time anyone conversed with him like that—well, except the members of the Nether Cult.

"Shut up, plebian! You insignificant insect! I can do whatever I like to you since you're a worm! Now be quiet and tell me how you know my name!"

"How can I be silent and answer your question, genius? You're a lot dumber than you look!"

That was the last straw.

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Chapter 544: Fairy King Beruel [Pt 1]

Beruel was completely flustered at this point. He had lost in a battle of words—an exchange of insults, for that matter.

The most humiliating aspect was that it was a human who brought him such shame.

Beruel was blazing with internal fury. There was no way he could let them live now—not that he was planning on doing so from the start.

"That's it!" Bright white light shot out of his body as he glared at the offenders.

"Hold on, man! Let's talk fir—"

"DIEEEEEEE!!!"

A surge of brilliant light burst from Beruel, lunging at the targets at light speed.

>BOOOOOOOOMMMM!!!<

Once again, the surroundings suffered damage. Heat emanated from the ground, producing hissing sounds.

However—

"Sheesh, so impatient..."

—the two humans were unharmed.

"I guess this is to be expected... since you have that Arcana." Beruel sighed, ashamed of himself for losing his anger.

"Arcana, uh? So you're indeed a part of their group. I see..." The blond human murmured, his tone slightly changing.

"Alright, human. Fine... I suppose I'll listen to you for a little whi—"

>VWOOOOOMMMMM<

Before Beruel concluded his speech, the boy was already in front of him, baring his fist at the King's face.

>BOOOOOOOOOMMMM!!!!<

An explosion erupted mid-air, and both parties were sent flying in opposite directions.

Both were unharmed, but they were certainly not as casual as before.

"You dare?! I have you a chance to speak, yet you abuse that privilege!"

"Sorry, man. There's no need to talk anymore. You're a part of their Organization, which means you're after the Arcana I hold... and also..."

The boy summoned two blades—one glowing with darkness, and the other glowing with bright light.

"... You're the ones responsible for the tragedy of the Demon Incident."

>WHOOOSHHH!!!<

The boy darted at the Fairy King, brandishing both blades as he began striking.

He was a natural at aerial combat, expertly twisting his body as he sent every powerful strike at the Fairy King with absolute vigor.

However, compared to Beruel... the boy was too sloppy!

>BOOOOOOOOOMMMM!!!!<

All of his strikes were nullified by Beruel's light shield.

"You're not bad, but you're not strong enough. I don't know how much you know about the Nether Cult, but I'm the Fourth Seat, you know? I'm not that easy to beat!"

The human boy's eyes widened when he heard that.

"You're... the Fourth Seat?"

"Yeah, I know, right? I should be ranked higher, but what can I say? That bitch just keeps getting in my wa—"

"Then... why are you so weak? I thought the Upper Seats would be far stronger than this, but..."

Beruel's eyes bulged, and veins began appearing all over his face.

"Human... you...."

"... I'm sorry, but you're just too weak. This is so underwhelming."

"You bastaaaarrrrrddd!!!" Beruel's face was currently the epitome of rage as more brilliant light pervaded the area.

He rushed at the blonde and gave more devastating strikes, but the boy evaded every single one of them.

"DIEEEE!!!" Several orbs of destruction were sent at the human, but he deflected some with his light blade while nullifying the others with his dark one.

Ultimately, their battle was at a stalemate, though intense to the young lady who observed from the ground.

"You're better than Aloe, by far. You're the strongest Light User I've faced, but... I expected more." The human kept taunting, until the Fairy King couldn't take it any longer.

"I'll show you then... my Original Magic!!!"

The blond human smiled, ready to accept the challenge.

"But first... I'll need to clarify something."

>VWOOOOOOOSSSSSHHHHH<

In a sudden flash of teleportation, Beruel disappeared from the sky and captured the human girl on the ground.

"W-wha—?!"

"Hahaha! Now that I have a hostage, will you cooperate!" He grinned, completely shrouding the girl in his Magic so that she was unable to move.

"What... what do you want?" The human asked, now visibly shaken by the sudden turn of events.

"Hahaha! Now that's more like it! Now, then, answer my question, and I'll release the girl before killing both of you with my Original Magic!"

"Tch."

"Tell me... where is the location of Kido's nephew? The one who has been hunting down our members!"

"Uh?" At this point, the human looked dumbfounded.

"Don't play dumb!"

"Kido? Who is that?"

"Argh! You might not know him, but I'm asking about his nephew!"

"If I don't know someone, how am I supposed to know he has a nephew? How dumb are you?"

"Hey!" Beruel growled, tightening his hold on the hostage he had.

The human got the message and was reminded of his position. His expression turned mellow, but no answer was given.

"I... I don't know any Kido."

"Tch... useless. Ah, I can't remember his name. Oh wait, their last name... that's right!"

The Fairy King seemed all over the place, but his grin showed that he finally arrived at the perfect question to ask.

"Midas! Yes, Midas! Do you know the location of that Midas boy that went to your Academy?"

Fairy King Beruel was terrible with names—especially when they didn't interest him.

He forgot so many things easily—perhaps it was because of his old age.

Though he looked youthful outwardly, Beruel was quite ancient.

"Midas... Kuzon?"

"Yes! That one! Where is he?!"

"Why would you even ask that? Of all things...? Wait, Kuzon has been hunting you guys down? He's the one behind those deaths? He killed Damien Lawcroft? Him? Now I'm even more confused..."

"Answer my question already!"

"I don't know where he is, dude. I'm even more surprised than you are. What's going on exactly."

"Urgh! Useless! Humans are so useless. To think I wasted my time."

"So... can I get the hostage back? Or do you have any other questions?"

"There's no need for the farce. I know this is just a fake. I don't know who taught you Magic Engineering, but you're good. For a human, that is."

"W-wha—?!"

The human's face displayed surprise. He wasn't expecting this.

'He knew?!' Jared's mind rang.

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Chapter 545: Fairy King Beruel [Pt 2]

"What? You knew?!"

The truth was that the girl in Beruel's grasp was none other than an Automaton that resembled a human female.

Beruel had noticed this from the moment he made contact with it, but he still went on with the act in order to get his information.

'Is he being dishonest? I don't think so... my Magic Tool isn't acting up.' The Fairy King thought to himself.

'Why would he go along with the whole act, though? Was he trying to glean information from me through this situation?'

The Fairy sighed, discarding the hostage he had in his grasp. He had completely lost interest in the situation.

"This is pointless. I don't even feel like fighting any longer." The Fairy King stared at the human boy, who still looked flustered.

"You can't fool someone like me with such an imitation. I also know you're holding back quite a bit. You were baiting me to display my full power, weren't you? Such basic tactics..."

The previous image of a hot-tempered and shortsighted Fairy King began to crumble as Beruel gave another deep sigh.

At this point, he was done playing games.

"There's no point for any further conflict. You're Jared Leonard, right?"

"You know my name?"

"I... just remembered. You're the one giving the Cult trouble, aren't you?"

"Yeah..."

Beruel nodded slightly and then shrugged.

"Well, I don't care what you do to the others, but I'll still oppose you. You see, we all have our reasons for being there, but they all revolve around the Arcanas."

The human, Jared, looked a bit surprised. Perhaps he didn't expect such sincerity from the proud Fairy King.

"I also need the Arcanas, so our interests conflict."

"I guess so. What will you do now, though? Will you try to take it from me by force?"

"There's no need for that. At least, not now. Even if I wanted to..." He glanced at the human boy.

"I only came to ask my questions. The Arcanas were a bonus, I suppose."

"Why are you looking for Kuzon, though?"

"Let's just say it's for revenge. I desire to kill him."

The human's face tightened a bit.

"What's wrong? Will you stand in my way?"

"Well, judging from what I've heard... he seems capable of taking care of himself."

Both Human and Fairy stared hard at each other in silence.

Finally, the Fairy King broke it.

"We'll see about that. One last thing... the way you interact with me, it's almost like we have met before. Who are you, really?"

"Well, that's a secret. Maybe I'll tell you some other time." Jared smiled slyly.

An aura of playfulness, rather than tension, seemed to envelop the area.

"I'm not so sure about that. You see, this area isn't my allocated territory. That's why I can't really act. You might end up dead before our next meeting."

Beruel's face showed sincerity, so Jared couldn't doubt it.

"Is that so? Well, I'll take my chances."

"Looks like your comrade are already approaching. I should take my leave. Hmm..."

"Well, then, till we next meet." Jared gave a warm-hearted smile, causing the Fairy King to shudder in discomfort.

He certainly found the human to be... strange.

"About that—"

Before either party could say any more, or even react, a golden flash of light descended from the sky.

>BRRRRTRRTTZZZZZZZZZZ!!!<

Instantly, it crashed upon the fairy King, sending volts of lightning and bursts of energy into his body.

>VWWOOOOOOOMMMMM!!!<

The Fairy King crashed in a flash of lightning, causing a wave of destruction around the area of impact.

>BOOOOOOOOMMMMM<

As he turned into nothing but cinders—thanks to the immense power that was destroying him—the decimated Fairy King smiled at the one who was responsible for his death.

"You... I finally found you... Kido's nephew."

The golden-haired boy said nothing, and simply proceeded to finish off the Fairy King.

"Wait! Don't do it!"

However, not heeding Jared's voice, the young Midas concluded the act, rendering the opponent into electrocuted dust.

"K-Kuzon!" Jared roared in both anger and surprise as he dashed in the boy's direction.

As the boy on the ground locked gazes with the one above, an air of recollection pervaded the air.

Both boys remembered their time together at Ainzlark—their fights as allies and opponents.

Looking at each other now, so much had changed.

Jared looked rage-filled, and Kuzon appeared oddly cold.

"You look angry... that doesn't suit you."

Jared ignored Kuzon's comment and still darted in the boy's direction.

However, a distance away, he suddenly halted.

"Tch, those pesky threads of yours."

Upon muttering that, Jared calmly descended to the ground, but his glare remained.

"You can see them clearly now. That's progress..."

"Why did you kill him?" Jared was annoyed.

"What do you mean 'him'? That wasn't the real one. It was just an identical version—most likely a Golem that is remotely controlled... or an Automaton?"

Jared's glare persisted.

"Surely, you realized that, didn't you?"

"Of course, I did! That's why I put a tracker on him. He was going to lead me to the original one. After all my acting, you had to ruin everything!"

Jared was fuming at this point.

If his cards were played right, he would have already gotten one member of the Nether Cult nabbed.

Unfortunately, or rather, Surprisingly, an unexpected person—Kuzon—had to ruin things.

"I doubt it. You realize he was already preparing to self-destruct, right? If I was able to figure out the one you kept on Damien, you think he wouldn't have noticed?"

"Ah..." Jared was now at a loss for words.

"The self-destruct blast might not have hurt you, but I couldn't afford to let him get away like that."

"Well, didn't you basically do the same by killing him?"

"I wonder about that..." Kuzon gave a cold smile, but his eyes wandered from Jared as he stared at the entrance of the cave—shaped like the mouth of a bodiless dragon.

"We have company... your allies, I presume. Hmm?"

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Chapter 546: Kuzon's Return

Footsteps emanated from the cave's entrance, and Jared's allies came into view.

Neron, Serah, Ivan, Edward, etc. All of them appeared, looking at the destruction around them.

Of all of them though, Kuzon's eyes only met one.

And that single person...

... also reciprocated his gaze.

They stared at each other for a while, and Kuzon was the first to move. The other person, in her small frame, shivered in both disbelief and stifled emotion.

She couldn't believe her eyes.

The person before her was far taller and more handsome than how she remembered him, but there was no way she could mistake his looks.

His golden eyes that greeted her, and the smile on his face...

"K-Kuzon...?" Ana whispered as she saw him.

There were also surprised gasps around her, but Ana couldn't hear any other voice or see any other face except the one in front of her.

Her heart raced like crazy, and while she felt guilty for feeling like this despite Jared watching from a distance, Ana was too petrified to do anything about it.

"Ana... it's been a while..." Kuzon appeared before her smoothly, almost like teleportation.

He suddenly held her in his arms, using one hand to support her face, while the other was on her lap.

'Heeeuuuuu!!!' Ana felt her face turn red as her skin tingled as a result of Kuzon's heated skin.

It was all happening too fast, and she was too delirious to take control—or make sense of what was happening.

"K-Kuzon, you—"

Before she could say anything else, his lips crashed upon hers, and a kiss was made.

"HMMMMMM?!!!"

Ana lost all control at that moment, and her fragile frame became locked in an embrace with the young man.

They both shared a passionate kiss, enough to send shocked expressions playing on the faces of everyone around them.

It was a single moment of ecstasy—albeit a very strange and confusing one.

It had been over two years since they last saw each other, yet...

... The young Midas's greeting to Ana was a kiss.

'Kuzon...' The girl's mind wandered as she lost herself in the pleasure—not minding anyone or anything else around her.

'This is—!!!'

Hearing about it was one thing, but seeing it in person was another ball game entirely.

Everyone was at a standstill, watching the event with either surprise or bashfulness, and for some reason, Lemi seemed to be excited about it.

'What did Ana tell Lemi about Kuzon? Hold on, in the first place...'

The entire scenario was occurring too fast, but it was dragging on for too long as well.

'I have to put an end to this.'

"Alright, you guys. Break it u—"

Kuzon's hand instantly pointed in my direction, as his palm indicated that I waited.

'Wait? For you to finish? This bastard...'

The dude began counting the seconds on his hand, and after all five of his fingers were down, he released Ana from his grasp.

She seemed so overwhelmed that her entire face was red, and even after he put her down, she was still woozy.

'If I wasn't certain before, I know it now. Ana clearly likes Kuzon. But, the thing I'm most concerned about is...'

I glared at Kuzon, and his eyes moved in my direction for a brief moment before turning away.

'... Does Kuzon feel the same? Sending a very strong signal, like a kiss, is something very dangerous.'

I knew it was somewhat hypocritical of me to say, but at least I never took any active steps in relating with Ana and the other girls.

"Don't you think you went too far, Kuzon?" I sharply spoke out.

While Ana was being supported by Lemi and being fanned by Asa, I had to address the matter.

If I didn't, and Ana got attached to him because of the misunderstood kiss, she could wound up breaking her heart.

"What do you mean?"

"Yeah, what do you mean, Jared? All I saw were two young ones passionately sharing a kiss. Also, where's Maria?"

I groaned upon hearing Serah's interruption. It seemed she was more of an advocate for love than she preferred taking my side.

'They're all staring at me like I'm a buzz kill, but no one understands...!' I resumed my glare on Kuzon.

It was all his fault, anyway.

"If you won't say anything, I will." I sighed, moving forward.

While it was nice to let young ones dream about romance, this wasn't the right time. Ana didn't need Kuzon's crazy influence at this time, considering we didn't know how much he had changed.

"That kiss he gave Ana... is none other than a Midas Customary Greeting and Farewell."

"UHHHH?!" Everyone looked surprised—everyone but Kuzon.

"Kuzon belongs to the Midas Race, the Midas Empire."

"For real?"

"Those guys?"

"No one has really seen them in centuries."

"Hold on... why would he be here if they—!!!"

Neron didn't appear surprised, and neither did Serah, but everyone else was completely bewildered.

"So, you knew?" I turned to Neron.

"Of course. I was the one that recommended Ainzlark Academy to him. I spoke to Serah about it, so we both sponsored him to attend. That's why he got in through a special recommendation examination." The stoic man shrugged.

"Ah, the back entrance, uh?"

"Don't look at me that way, Jared. If I let him take the Exams like everyone else, he could have overdone it."

I couldn't argue with that logic. Still... why was I just learning about all this now?

"Why would a Midas be here, though? The Midas Empire doesn't involve itself with the affairs of other nations, right?"

I had many questions—not just about Kuzon, but about their nation itself.

After recovering my memory about the Midas Race—at least, some of them—I launched a search. Unfortunately, I didn't get any news at all.

I also tried looking, but I couldn't find them anywhere.

I knew they were good at hiding themselves from the outside world, but still... it seemed like they didn't exist at all.

"Well, about that..." Neron glanced in Kuzon's direction.

Something about the tension in the air made me realize just how grim the situation was.

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Chapter 547: Conflict Of Interest [Pt 1]

I turned my focus on Kuzon, but at this point, he simply looked uninterested.

The question of what happened to his race, his nation, did not faze the boy in the slightest.

"That's because the Midas Empire no longer exists. It was destroyed twelve years ago." There was a dead calm in his eyes as he spoke about it.

"W-what—? How did that even—?!"

"That's enough talk. I've gotten what I wanted, and I also gave my customary greeting to Ana. I'm leaving."

Kuzon took a step back, and golden lightning formed on his body.

"Wait."

Once again, he didn't listen to me. Apparently, he simply wanted to abandon everyone again—even Ana, whom he just kissed.

"I said wait!"

Instantly utilizing my Anti-Magic, I disabled the golden lightning that danced around his body.

"Hmm?" Kuzon looked surprised for a moment, and then a slight spark of interest appeared in his eyes.

"What did you do?" His voice still sounded cold, a sharp contrast from the young boy I remembered in Ainzlark.

'Just how much has he changed? Or was he always like this... and I never noticed?'

Could I even call myself Kuzon's friend after everything I was discovering? No one knew anything about him, and he was basically detached from everyone at this point.

"I'll tell you once we're done with this conversation. Why are you in such a hurry? Where are you going?" I narrowed my eyes.

I began putting my brain to work. Kuzon's appearance was a surprise and all, but it wasn't entirely bad.

'He's strong, and he has experience hunting down those Cult members. If I bring him to my side, then...'

The prospect of that plan was good. The only issue was how to tie him down and ensure cooperation.

"My next target. If you're not telling me what I want to know, that's fine too. Just don't get in my way." With that, Kuzon began walking away.

'He can't activate Magic since I used Anti-Magic, so he'll just walk? Just how uncooperative can this guy be?'

Still, I wasn't going to give up!

Kuzon was a Midas, and his race boasted of having a superior overall constitution—even better than the Beastfolk.

Other than Neron and myself, and Serah too; I expected Kuzon to be stronger than every member of our team.

He was indispensable at this point.

"Why don't we share Intel? Tell us what you know, and we'll tell you what we know. That way, everyone gets what they want."

Kuzon stopped dead in his tracks.

He glanced in my direction, half of his face displayed thanks to his golden hair covering the other part.

"Fine. Start first."

His hands were in his pocket, and his cloak danced with the wind.

Despite our long time apart, and how much the boy had changed in both behavior and looks, some things remained the same.

For one, the three Magic Items he donned as a necklace, ring, and bracelet.

He also had a luxurious outfit, purple shirt, and dark pants, with gold linings accentuating their prestige.

His shoes were also unique, and everything he donned had special Magic properties.

'Did he make them himself, or...?' There were many questions in my mind, but I decided to leave them for when I finished bringing the young Midas to our team.

"Fine. I'll begin."

Before starting the information exchange, I brought Maria out of the subspace I hid her in when Beruel attacked.

She was initially flustered, but seeing everyone's faces calmed her down quickly. Serah took it upon herself to fill her in on what happened, so I could focus on my conversation with Kuzon.

On one end was our group, and on the other was Kuzon.

He looked dead calm, and there was no trace of a smile on his face.

'Jeez... when did he get so edgy?'

Since I was the one starting, I had to make my information appealing. If not, I doubted Kuzon would stick around.

'I don't know how much Kuzon knows about the Cult's involvement in the just-concluded war, of their goal of collecting Arcanas...'

To be safe, I mentioned all of them.

"The Nether Cult currently has ten Arcanas. "The Magician. The Lovers. The Star. Death. The Papess. The Chariot. Justice. Temperance. The Empress—"

"The Empress??!" Kuzon's eyes widened and he broke out of his cool character the moment I mentioned the Empress Arcana.

"Yeah. Finally, the Devil. They are also searching for others... like this one we just got " I showed him the [Strength] Arcana, but Kuzon didn't seem the least bit interested in it.

Frankly, that was a bit unsettling.

"Do you know which members have which Arcanas? Like The Empress?" He asked with genuine interest.

"No, we don't. But, only the upper echelon members of their Organization are allowed to wield Arcanas, so it has to be a member of the top brass."

"Of course. That much is obvious. Anything else?" He tapped his finger on his folded arm impatiently.

'This looks like he can't wait to get out of here. What the...?!'

I thought he would find some of the information I shared with him to be useful, but was I just wasting his time?

'Well, I have a trump card...!' A smile formed on my face as I was ready to knock Kuzon's condescending gaze off his face.

"I know where their base is located."

Once again, the boy's eyes lit with interest, causing me to smile within myself.

'Heh! He took the bait!'

"I see. Alright then. Of everything you've told me, I suppose the one thing I still haven't figured out is the location of their base." Kuzon sighed, returning his hands to his pockets.

"I'll tell you what I know, and then you'll tell me the name of the base. Once that's over with, we can go our separate ways."

'This guy...!' Was he intentionally trying to avoid being indebted to our group?

"Well, that's fine. It depends on the information you bring to the table, though."

At this point, I had already set a bar for the level of information I desired. It would take quite the information to trump that.

"Well, hear for yourself."

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Chapter 548: Conflict Of Interest [Pt 2]

'W-what in the world?!'

I was amazed by the amount of information Kuzon had on the Nether Cult.

Not only had he deciphered the identity of some members, but he had also killed a total of four of them.

"While you were engaging in your silly war, I tracked down their sites and killed them. Damien Lawcroft was my third target, and afterward, I went further to eliminate the 8th Seat at the time."

According to Kuzon, there were eight more members in the Cult's Seats, and he also told us about some of them.

"Vaizar is a Dragon Beastfolk. Then we have Beruel, the one who is an expert Magic Engineer. He has a knack for evading me, since I can't find the real body. Other than those two, I know there's another Demon in their ranks. A newcomer joined them about two years back... and apparently, he's made it to the a high-ranking position."

Asa was surprised to hear the name, Vaizer.

"T-that's the Beast King before my father!"

I had no idea why a Beastfolk, especially one who belonged to the very rare and powerful Dragon specie, would join the Nether Cult.

'Considering he's still alive, then maybe they gave him a cure as well?'

That made sense, since Gerard also rolled over when I offered the same thing.

I was surprised that another Demon would be in the Nether Cult's Ranks, considering their plans involved sacrificing the entire Demon Race.

'Kuzon already killed a Crimson Demon, so that means there were two members of the Demon Race before then. This is... disturbing.'

However, despite all I was learning, I was not ready for the next shocking piece of information Kuzon dropped on me.

"Reed Sterling, the last Grand Mage of the Eastern Kingdom is also a member of their group."

At this, even Neron and Serah—who had been silent since Kuzon began speaking—displayed surprise.

Serah's eyes widened and Neron gave a disappointed sigh while shaking his head.

"T-that geezer actually did that?"

"Well, this is an interesting turn of events. Makes sense, though. So that's what he has been up to."

Kuzon gave us other details, like the location of the bases he had explored, and how they had advanced technology at their disposal.

Once he was done, I was certain he shared more than I did.

'He knows so much... amazing.'

While I isolated myself to get stronger, Kuzon explored the world and actively investigated the Nether Cult.

It wasn't until recently that he started killing its members.

The notion was both impressive and scary.

"I've fulfilled my end of the bargain. Now, tell me the location of their headquarters."

I was hesitant to share my final piece of information, but... Kuzon already said more than enough to earn it.

"Why are you after the Nether Cult, though? So far, it doesn't seem like you care about the Arcanas or Demons. You also seem particularly interested in the members. Is there someone, in particular, you're looking for?"

A moment of tense silence enveloped our sphere, and I stared hard at Kuzon, hoping for an answer.

"That's not your business."

"You might be right, but consider it the question of a worried friend. It's not just Ana who cares about you... I do as well."

While I was just trying to appeal to Kuzon to share his motive, my statement wasn't a total lie.

'You shouldn't throw your life away. Join our team!'

"Oh? Is that so? Then... as a friend as well, will you tell me the true reason the Nether Cult is after you, Mr. Singularity?"

"—Uh??" Surprise almost leaked out, but I struggled to maintain my poker face.

"You're wondering how I know so much, don't you? Well, when you torture multiple members of the Cult and extract information from them, connecting the dots isn't so difficult."

"You're much more capable than I took you for."

"So, will you tell me?"

"Well, that's a personal matter..." I glanced around and realized that curious gazes were now on me.

'Kuzon, this sly bastard. He shifted everyone's attention to me!'

"Mine is a personal matter as well. I would prefer it if you didn't interfere. Now, tell me the location."

At this point, I had to give the victory to Kuzon. He was always so witty in terms of driving a conversation—even back at Ainzlark.

But, the more I was impressed by his abilities, the more I didn't want to let him go.

"Isn't it dangerous to go to their headquarters alone? I'll tell you the place, but you should join us."

"What?"

"We share the same enemies—the Nether Cult. If we work together, we'll surely take them down. You... you don't have to carry all that burden by yourself."

"..."

For a moment, there was silence.

I couldn't tell whether my words worked or not, but Kuzon appeared a bit dazed for some time.

'Did I get him?!'

Unfortunately for me...

"Pffffttt!!!"

... I wasn't even close.

"Hahaha! When did you get so corny, Jared? The heck is that?"

I felt a bit embarrassed, but I remained silent.

"I don't have to carry all that burden by myself? That's why I should team up with you? Normally your statement would be a lot more credible, except for one critical factor."

At this point, Kuzon was smiling. However, it wasn't a warm one. His grin was more condescending than I'd ever seen.

"To me, you people are the burden. In a way, I suppose you're right... I shouldn't carry burdens."

Okay, that was too far.

"Really? We're burdens?"

"Yeah. You are."

My frown deepened, but I couldn't afford to let his words get to me.

"Even me?" I smiled ruefully.

"Perhaps I didn't make myself clear. Other than Neron, I don't see anyone here who could help me out. Ah, Serah Crimson could prove useful too... but three is a crowd."

It had been forever since I was referred to as dead weight.

I could understand why Kuzon felt the others weren't up to his standards, but it felt oddly annoying that I was lumped into the same boat.

Kuzon moved closer until he was right in front of me.

He looked down on me and bent a little to repeat his words in my ear.

"In essence, you're a burden too, Jared."

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Chapter 549: An Overdue Rematch

I remembered the time when the Demons invades Ainzlark Academy.

Edward and Jerry wanted to accompany me on my mission to save the Girls' Dormitory.

They were earnest, and they were both more powerful and dependable than anyone around.

However...

"You'll only slow me down."

... I refused their aid.

It wasn't pride or overconfidence. It was the truth.

Although I needed help, having those two with me would only hamper my movements and risk putting my task in jeopardy.

As a result, I left them behind and went on my own.

"You're dead weight, Jared."

Those words wounded my heart. It was the first time Kuzon was this close to me, and I felt the difference in our height.

Still, there was no way I could accept his words—especially in terms of power.

"Why don't we test that out." I gave an annoyed smirk at the condescending boy.

"I have nothing to prove. Just give me my information, and I'll leave."

"If you want your information, you'll listen to what I have to say."

It was a dishonorable thing to do, and in retrospect, I was bound to regret my decision. However, at the moment, I was too desperate and annoyed to care less.

'Is this what they call a man's pride? I don't like it, but..'

"I understand your ego has been bruised. But, isn't that just shameless of you to withhold my rightfully earned information?" Kuzon's words didn't make things any better.

"He has a point, you know?" Neron decided to add more salt to my injury.

"Yeah, just give him what he wants so he can be on his way." Serah sighed.

The expression of everyone else also told me that they were taking Kuzon's side.

'Can't anyone see what he's trying to do? Also...'

"Are you cool with that too, Ana?" I asked the only person who gave an uncertain expression.

Apparently, she had already recovered from the kiss she shared with Kuzon.

"I don't particularly care." Her voice sounded tired.

"Well, that's a bit hurtful, Ana," Kuzon spoke with a broader smile.

"Well, you called me a burden, didn't you? Plus, that kiss wasn't genuine. Just a greeting? Urgh, so typical..."

Kuzon's smile vanished and he suddenly gave me a slightly irritated look.

'What's up with that? What did I do?'

"This is pointless. Fine, let's play your game." The golden-haired boy shrugged, finally creating some distance between me and him.

"Perfect!"

I had no idea why Kuzon decided to accept. If he refused, I would still have no choice but to tell him what he wanted to know.

'He should know that, yet...!' I glanced at Ana and noticed her pouting.

Was it because of Ana's influence? Did Kuzon actually have feelings for her?

'I guess I'll find out after he joins us.'

"Why don't we restart the match we never got to finish at the Inter Class Exchange? Me versus you." I declared with a broad grin.

"I see. So that's it? Alright, what are the stakes?"

'I know Kuzon has grown very powerful, and I don't want to underestimate him. But... he doesn't realize how powerful I've gotten as well.'

"If I win, you'll join our team. That way, I would have proven that we won't be a burden to you."

"And if you lose?"

"You can have whatever you want. I don't care, since you won't be winning anyway." I smiled at the cocky Midas.

"After the match, no matter the outcome, I'll tell you the location of their headquarters."

Upon adding this, I glanced at Neron and he gave me a thumbs up. I didn't know if it was out of goodwill or something else, but he didn't say any more.

"Since I want this fight to be over and done with, let's not restrict our abilities. No limits, anything goes... right?" Kuzon gave a brazen smile.

'This guy... if I use Original Magic and Anti-Magic, in addition to Spellcraft, this match is as good as mine.'

I wasn't one to underestimate my opponents, but no matter how powerful Kuzon was, he remained below the level of Neron.

Since he acknowledged Serah, that meant he wasn't as strong as she was—or maybe they were on the same level.

'I have more Miasma than I did in the past, so I should be able to nullify most of his attacks. Spellcraft will grant me the environmental advantage, and I'll have the chance to adapt his techniques through my Original Magic.'

This was an opportunity, and I wasn't planning on missing out on it.

"If you're done grinning, can we get started?" Kuzon interrupted my thoughts, his hands in his pockets.

The breeze gently blew his golden hair as he maintained a cool gaze.

"Sure. Neron, would you please help us erect a barrier?"

As part of my countermeasures, I decided not to show my hand.

'If he sees I'm very good at defense, he might switch his strategy. It's better if my opponent has no idea what I'm capable of, especially since it's Kuzon.'

Misdirection was a strategy that was too risky when I had no concrete plan or long-term goal.

'I'll be playing things by ear... but I'll make sure I win.'

So far, there were three major factors about Kuzon I couldn't ignore.

One was his Original Magic—the annoying strings that he controlled. I had no idea how much they had evolved, but if I could see them, then it would be fine to maintain my distance and figure out a solution.

'I could also disable it with Anti-Magic...'

The second factor was his vast amount of Mana, and his wide array of Magic.

This could also be resolved using Anti-Magic. Plus, I had quite the arsenal of Magic myself, not to mention Spellcraft.

Finally, his combat skills.

Kuzon was superior to me in Martial Arts the last time we fought, and even I had to admit that he was too strong.

Unfortunately for him, I had the Arcanas at my beck and call.

Using my Great Sage's Memoir to coordinate my attacks and movements, not even someone as skilled as Kuzon could keep up.

'I still have no idea what his Familiar is, but it should be fine...'

I had thousands at my command, so I still had the upper hand in that department.

'His Familiar should be Mana-Based. If I overwhelm it with Miasma, it should be my win.'

After analyzing the situation properly, it was nigh impossible for me to win.

Of course, I would keep my guard up against any uncertainty, but so far... I wasn't going to lose confidence in my victory.

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Chapter 550: The Emperor [Pt 1]

"Are you done planning? Let's begin already." Kuzon appeared bored already.

His smile had faded, and he looked more like Neron at this point—so unassuming and bland.

"Fine. Let's do this."

We didn't need a referee to tell us when to begin, so I decided to take the initiative and launch my first attack.

"Gawain..."

>WHOOOSSH!<

My Automaton instantly appeared and rushed in the direction of the adversary.

With the full energy it packed, and the speed it undertook, not a single member of my team would be able to react so quickly.

'Of course, I know you're different, Kuzon...'

Which was why I decided to test the waters first.

With a smile on my face, I watched to see how Kuzon would fare—and how long he would last against Gawain.

'I'll collect as much data as I can and—'

>BOOOOOOOOOOMMMMMM<

Before I realized what happened, Gawain was on the ground, completely crushed apart like debris.

'—Uh?!'

I couldn't even see what happened or how it was done, but my Automaton—The Ultimate Automaton—was on the ground.

Its body was crushed, and several parts flew around, like broken rocks.

In one shot, Gawain was down.

"You'd really send this one after me first? I know you've changed a lot, Jared, but I didn't think it was to this extent..."

I was roused by Kuzon's voice and I watched his lips curl down disapprovingly.

"When did you lose your balls?"

'Is he trying to trigger me? In a fight? That's not going to work!'

"It doesn't matter how many of those small fries you throw at me... the results will still be the same."

'Gawain... is small fry...?'

As I looked at my badly damaged Automaton, I found out that its body wasn't healing for some reason.

I kept a special Magic effect on it that allowed for restoration after taking damage, but it wasn't working.

'Why isn't it working?'

"Come at me yourself... anything less than that is just a waste of time."

I stared at Kuzon for a bit and tried to get a read on his stoic face.

'Is he baiting me? He has been emphasizing a direct fight between me and him... why?'

Was it possible that the power Kuzon used on Gawain was merely a show?

Maybe he couldn't use it consecutively, or even often.

There was a possibility that the pulverizing effect was the work of one of his Magic Items. But, using a blow that powerful should have had its limits.

'So, he doesn't want to overexert himself by fighting more of my subordinates? Or...?'

"I know what's going on in your mind. You're thinking of strategies to counter whatever plan you think I've cooked up..." Kuzon sighed, now leaving his location as he approached.

In a cool stride, his hands still in his pockets, Kuzon moved slowly.

His eyes never left me for a moment.

"... But you're wrong, Jared. There's no plan or trick at work here. This is just pure power. You're going to be dominated by total power. That's all there is to it."

Everything he was saying could have been a bluff, but why did I feel like they were true?

The last time we fought, something similar happened.

'Is it so hard to imagine myself losing?'

For someone like Neron, I knew I stood no chance. As for Serah, in certain conditions, she would also emerge victorious.

However, Kuzon was different.

I felt like, no matter how powerful he had become, I should be stronger.

It was pride, after all.

"Well, looks like I'll have to go in anyway..." I smiled.

But, why would I ever do that?!

>WHOOOOOSSSSHHHH<

Instantly, several Automatons appeared from my special space, and they dashed in his direction.

All of them were coated in immense Mana, making them as durable as Gawain in his base form.

However—

>BOOOOOOMMMMM<

—The results were the same.

They weren't even five meters from Kuzon, yet they all got pulverized by a strange force.

"This is a waste of time." Suddenly, bright glimmers of golden light appeared around Kuzon, and they wrapped around him like wires.

'Those threads... his Original Magic!'

The golden threads suddenly took form, turning into several sharp blades.

"Let's start with this."

>WHOOOOOSSSSHHHH<

In a flash of light—no, probably even faster—the blades lunged in my direction.

