

SPELLCRAFT 621

SPELLCRAFT: Reincarnation Of A Magic Scholar

Chapter 621: Trapped [Pt 2]

An incomprehensible amount of time passed. Jerry couldn't tell how long, but it felt like forever.

The duo waited in the garden, setting up a well-laid structure they could rest their backs on while waiting for Jared to return.

Jerry knew he had to stick very close to Ciara—especially due to the darkened conditions of the area—so they were currently cuddling.

It reminded him of old times.

'Still... am I not a bit sweaty? Do I smell? Is she just enduring it? Ah, this is so embarrassing...'

Still, the mere fact that Ciara was comforted by his presence made him, at the very least, feel a little better about himself.

The mission was a bust.

Not only that, but they were now waiting to be rescued by Jared.

'I would have tried to scout the area... or perhaps look at the area from a higher ground, but...'

It was better to just wait for Jared. Not only did they have no idea where they were, but they also didn't know how long it would take to get home.

Besides, with the dangers they were currently facing, staying put was the best way to ensure their safety.

But, after waiting for so long... Jerry was tired of simply staying in a single spot and waiting to be saved.

His heart tightened in dissatisfaction, and frustration coursed through his veins. He would end up being rescued... and he would also have nothing to show for it.

'Am I really okay with this...?'

The only other option was Ciara's suggestion. He didn't know how feasible it was, but he considered it more now than ever.

'What am I thinking?! Kissing Ciara? I would go that far to preserve my ego?' Jerry felt more disgusted with himself.

Compared to their time in Ainzlark, Jerry felt like he and Ciara had gotten closer. Sure they still had their rivalry going on, but still... he didn't feel all too distant from her.

That was precisely why he couldn't think of using her.

'M-maybe if she... suggests it again...'

As if Ciara was reading his mind, she stirred from her slightly dazed state. Jerry's attention slowly shifted in her direction, and he saw how amazing she looked.

Her pursed lips were attractive beyond belief. He wanted to touch them, no doubt. Her face was also very cute... and Ciara had always been pretty.

Seeing her sleep the way she did, seeing her so vulnerable... it was indeed cute to Jerry.

'She's sleeping, so it'll be less embarrassing. Should I try... it?'

Jerry felt ashamed of himself once more, but he couldn't help thinking about it regardless. The possibility of ending everything with a single kiss.

In fact, wouldn't it be selfish for him NOT to kiss her?

'Why am I justifying failure due to my ethics? I should try to do what I can to win... even if I feel bad about it.'

The fate of the world was at stake. Why was he so hung up on his values?

'Sometimes... compromises must be made.'

That's right! For the greater good, he had to damn his conscience and do what guaranteed success — even in the slightest.

It definitely wasn't because Ciara was an attractive young woman. Neither was it because she was cute beyond belief. No, that wasn't it.

'I just... want to complete the mission...'

With this thought ringing in his head, Jerry leaned closer to the girl beside him. He was so nervous he could cry. Still, he had made up his mind.

'I'll do it! I have to do it!' Puckering his lips, Jerry drew even closer to his target.

'Here I go!'

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'He's coming! He's really doing it! Finally!' Ciara grinned within herself in excitement.

It took him long enough, but the girl somewhat knew that Jerry would break at some point. It had only been a matter of time.

'That's why I had to confiscate your Spell Card... not that it would have been useful, to begin with.'

The thing was that, unlike Jerry, Ciara was in perfect control of the situation. Not only had she masterminded the whole monster rush, but also Jerry's card being lost.

It was all thanks to her mischief.

However, it wasn't as though the girl wanted to torture Jerry intentionally. It was love. She simply did everything out of love!

'He needed the push. And now, with how long we've spent here... he'll finally go through with it.'

She could feel her partner's body trembling as he drew even closer to her. His sweaty musk made her even more excited and she awaited the moment their lips would connect.

It took all of her willpower not to pucker up her lips or to swiftly connect her lips to his.

'No! None of those will be satisfying!'

She wanted him to do it himself. And finally, after waiting for so long... it was finally happening!

It was finally—

'U-uh...!'

Jerry's lips connected.

It sent shivers down her body, and the simple contact between them caused what felt like her body being electrocuted.

Of course, she controlled the external display, but her insides were in a state of excitement. It was thrilling!

'But...' Ciara thought to herself, half in disappointment.

Sure, his lips connected, and sure it could be regarded as a kiss. However, this wasn't exactly what she'd had in mind.

'... Why did you choose my forehead?!'

She wanted mouth-to-mouth, and Jerry must have known that. Yet, he chickened out at the last minute.

'Jerry, it seems you have a long way to go in order to fully express your feelings. I understand. I'll keep supporting you.'

Just like now, all Ciara had to do was create the ideal scenario for them.

'Still, the forehead kiss was amazing. I... I'll forgive you for today.' She grinned internally.

Jerry did all he did because of the desire to change the narrative and obtain results. Ciara knew that much. Since he had performed his side of the deal, it was only right that she delivered her end of the deal.

'I guess I'll break us out of this illusory world.'

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Chapter 622: Judgement [Pt 1]

Ever since they stepped into the building for the first time, Ciara had felt something.

—Something invasive.

As an expert in mind games and Mind Magic, she was familiar with the sensation and concept. That was why she knew the truth immediately.

'We're in an illusion.'

Ciara acted naturally, though, trying her best to gather as much information as she could. She studied the building's structure, and the denizens within.

Everything felt real.

'Impressive... very impressive!'

The illusion was incredibly powerful, and the hold it had on them was very strong. However, with her Original Magic, [Phantom Link], Ciara was confident in her ability to escape.

Still... there was no way she would simply cut her adventure with Jerry so short.

They had to have some fun first!

Thus, the whole monster attacks that she instigated. Then, the wild goose chase she created. Everything was for the purpose of mutual bonding.

However, once Ciara realized that they had to get to the real world eventually, she faced a dilemma.

'If I tell him about the illusion now, he'll wonder why I didn't mention it earlier. Well, I could just lie to him, but...'

Jerry was currently battling a lot of self esteem problems. Ciara knew he felt inferior to her, and while it was cute, she wanted him to also grow.

'If I point out the problem and help him solve it, he'll probably feel worse.'

It was while she was brainstorming the issue that Ciara found the perfect excuse to use.

'A kiss!'

By causing him to kiss her, she would pretend as though it was the power of the kiss that broke them out of their predicament.

That way, Jerry would be the one to take the active position and feel good about himself after achieving the result.

'Plus, I get a kiss. Hehe... I'm such a genius!'

It was perfect, and foolproof too!

Well, there was one major issue that determined the success or failure of the plan. And that was simply Jerry's willingness.

As she'd feared, the boy initially didn't want to go along with it. Thus, she stole his Spell Cards before he even noticed.

'The Spell Card won't transport us to Jared since this is an illusion, but that's precisely the problem.'

If the Spell Card didn't work the way it was supposed to, Jerry could determine that they were in an illusion or under a certain effect. And that wouldn't bode well.

Worst case scenario would be if they indeed teleported to Jared, but were still within the illusion. That would just make the whole thing continuous, and Ciara would ultimately have to break them out without getting her kiss.

'I have to get my kiss!'

Thus, the Spell Cards had to go.

By giving Jerry time to think things over, by pretending to be asleep, he was slowly convinced.

Ciara knew how attractive she was, and that Jerry was attracted to her. If a kiss was the only feasible alternative, and she was practically waiting beside him...

....Jerry would ultimately kiss her!

And, just as she planned, everything came together.

'Sure, it was a forehead kiss, but it still works... for now.'

Ciara sent a mental pulse the moment Jerry planted his lips on her forehead, expertly utilizing her Original Magic to break down the false reality they were trapped in.

>BZZTTTTZZZ<

"W-what's going on??!" Jerry exclaimed, watching as the reality around him started to fizzle out.

"U-uh...?" Ciara stirred, pretending she was just waking from her sleep.

"T-the kissed work! It actually worked?! Were we trapped in a barrier before?" Jerry beamed, glancing around him as the environment faded from sight.

The garden turned to dust, and the environment dissolved. Slowly, darkness crept all around them, and then light emerged.

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"Well done."

A voice woke Jerry and Ciara from the darkness, and both of them opened their eyes to perceive the one who spoke.

The moment their eyes flashed open, the first thing they noticed was the change in scenery.

They were within the mansion once again, but this time things were different.

The chandeliers were well-lit, and the hall they stood in was full of light and life. The tiled ground was exquisite, the rug looked brand new too.

There were murals on the walls, and the entire environment seemed habitable and friendly enough.

The warmth felt nothing like the dark eeriness from earlier.

It was clear that this was the same building they'd entered previously, but... everything was different and amazing—as though brand new.

Sofas were well arranged, and the curtains were beautiful and well-placed. It was simply exquisite.

"Is this... another illusion?" Ciara murmured.

"Not quite. Also, I would prefer you didn't ignore me."

Ciara's focus, as well as Jerry's attention, finally centered on the most conspicuous entity in the room.

It was a man seated on the master's sofa. He had a cup of tea in his hand, and he seemed like a classy nobleman.

The way he was dressed depicted elegance. His simmering blue hair felt like the ocean itself, and it completely matched his eyes. His face was perfectly chiseled, he had the perfect skin tone. He was definitely the most handsome person the duo had ever met.

This man—whoever he was—was simply the epitome of perfection.

"Who... are you?" Jerry was the one to ask the question.

He felt awkward being in the presence of such a powerful and elegant man without saying a word.

'Is he the owner of this place? Is he the Boss? Do we need to fight him? How can we defeat him?' Those were the thoughts that echoed in Jerry's mind as he greeted the perfect human.

They couldn't be careless.

'For all we know, this could also be an illusion.'

"H-hey! You don't have to think of me as an enemy, you know? Yes, I'm the owner of this house, but I'm not some kind of Boss or anything. This isn't a Dungeon."

Jerry was both surprised and relieved.

"You can read my mind?" He gasped, slightly wishing he hadn't been so quick to judge.

"Yes, I can. Alright... let's take this from the top, shall we?" The seated man sighed.

He rose from his seat and smiled at the two who stood before him—as elegant and as charismatic as anyone could get.

"My name is Lancelot. I am an Apostle of Aether... wielder of the Arcana of Judgement."

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Chapter 623: Judgement [Pt 2]

"My name is Lancelot. I am an Apostle of Aether... wielder of the Arcana of Judgement."

Ciara and Jerry's eyes widened—the latter's own being more obvious—as the man introduced himself.

His warm smile and cool gaze made it even cooler, and none of them could deny the validity of his statement.

None except...

"Prove it."

... Ciara.

"Huh?"

"Prove you're an Apostle of Aether and stuff." She emphasized, still staring at the man with suspicious eyes.

Jerry, at this point, was completely flustered—no, more like worried.

"Don't mind my partner, Sir Lancelot. She simply means that it would be nice if there was something to prove your identity and stuff. Haha..."

Ciara didn't seem apologetic, so Jerry had to prevent consequences that could arise as result of her actions.

"Oh, that. I suppose you'd like to see my Arcana."

Instantly, a brilliant light engulfed the room, and within moments, a card appeared. It hovered atop Lancelot's open palm, and the object was filled with great power.

"A-amazing..."

The card was embroidered with amazing designs at the edges, and the image displayed at the center was that of an angelic being blowing a trumpet.

At this point, even the doubtful Ciara believed it.

"I'm impressed you were able to interfere with my Magic Barrier. As you we all know, it interferes with the mind, so even several powerful people who came here in the past were not able to leave."

Lancelot wanted to make certain that these young ones were aware of the feat they had accomplished.

"W-wha—? So, they died?"

Lancelot nodded his head and sat down gently. He didn't seem all too pleased about the deaths of his unfortunate victims, but it didn't appear as though he was remorseful either.

"They trespassed on my abode. They sought after my power. Surely, they knew the risks involved. It is within my rights to defend my property. Should they desire the power I offer, they simply had to work hard for it."

Unfortunately for the previous candidates, they had been too weak mentally.

Not only had their minds been completely affected by the barrier placed around the house—which caused everyone within it to fall under an illusion—but it didn't take long for their mental processes to be completely eroded by the long-term effects of such powerful Mind Magic.

"You two are the first to make it this far. For that, I am duly impressed."

Jerry and Ciara broke into smiles—the former being the most expressive. He had a thought he simply had to leak out.

"I didn't think it would work, but... Ciara was right. That kiss really was powerful enough to break through the illusion!"

Jerry's sudden declaration surprised Lancelot, almost as much as it embarrassed his partner. She would have said something if not that it would reveal her plan to him.

"A... kiss?" Lancelot asked in a curious tone.

"Yeah. To be honest, we were also trapped without being aware of anything. When we were stranded, Ciara recommended a kiss—since she had researched how it broke through in dangerous situations. I initially didn't want to, but—"

No one had to stop Jerry before he paused for a moment. He couldn't go any further, and his shivering gaze slowly went to the girl beside him.

She looked very innocent... and she was—at least to Jerry.

'Crap! How do I explain that I kissed her? I know it was just on the forehead, but...'

Ciara was sleeping when he'd performed the act. Wouldn't she consider him to be a pervert if he revealed his actions.

'I literally took advantage of her in that state!'

That was unforgivable for Jerry, but also very humiliating. It was better to swallow it all and not say anything.

"Hm? Well, I don't really understand what you're talking about..." Lancelot glanced in Ciara's direction for a while.

His eyes narrowed on her, and a smile formed on his face. The girl was personally a bit nervous, but nothing too scary.

"Well, not to waste any of our time, I would like to pick my successor now." Lancelot rose to his feet once more.

His charming appearance never seemed to become dull, in the slightest.

"O-okay..." Jerry muttered.

"Cool." Ciara responded in a calmer tone.

Before them was an object of indescribable power. Only one of them would reap the rewards.

"You need to be compatible enough for this power, so I'll be testing you in different rooms. Prepare yourselves."

With a snap of his fingers, one of the two vanished—creating two equally similar realities within the same building.

Like a broken mirror being able to reflect different things on the same surface, the division separated the two teenagers into separate spaces.

"Now that he's gone, we can talk freely... Ciara Epsilon." Lancelot smiled, walking closer to the girl before him.

"What do you mean?"

"You already knew of the barrier the moment you entered. You were also keenly observing the nature of the ability, and you were also the one who broke out of the mind prison."

Ciara sighed once she heard these. Apparently, she wanted it to be a secret, but how could she expect to fool a master?

"Isn't it just okay to give Jerry the Arcana? I don't really need it, since I'm strong already." Her response contained absolute honesty. She really felt that way.

"Unfortunately, no. He has no affinity or ability to aid in the mastery of this Arcana. The opposite is true about you. I doubt there's anyone with enough affinity than you." Lancelot smiled softly.

"Why? Because of my Original Magic?"

The man burst into a slight chuckle, but also shook his head slightly.

"It's part of it, but not the complete story. Your Original Magic, and your affinity for this Arcana all boil down to the same thing."

This just made the girl more confused. Of course, she had always known she was special since her childhood—especially when Magic was involved, but... what did that have to do with the Arcana before her?

"Your surname, Epsilon, do you not know it's origins? Perhaps I ought to inform you..." Lancelot's eyes seemed to grow brighter than ever.

"I am Lancelot Epsilon, founder of the Epsilon Lineage as well as your ancestor."

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Chapter 624: Epsilon

"M-my ancestor...?!"

Lancelot nodded at Ciara's surprised reaction. His genuine smile and the soul-filled smile didn't display an atom of dishonesty.

"I knew it from the moment I saw you... that you were my descendant. Let's call it one of my special abilities. We resonate quite well too. Do you not feel it?"

Ciara didn't know what to say. She was stunned beyond words.

'Yes, I've also been feeling something within myself, but I just thought that it was because of the Mind Magic. What is this guy saying?'

Ciara Epilson grew up in the slums. She hadn't had the easiest of lives, and she certainly wasn't one lost princess that needed salvation from her long lost lineage or parents.

Her parents died pretty early, but they left her their thatched house and the surname she now carried.

Nothing about her life resembled being related to some great guy in the past.

"I see... so that's how your life had gone. That sucks."

"W-what?! You read my mind?" Ciara burst out in annoyance, obviously peeved by the invasion of privacy.

Lancelot Epilson didn't seem to have an issue with it, though. His simple shrug showed that much.

"I really don't know what happened over the years that deteriorated our lineage, but... you come from a prestigious family, Ciara. The vast pool of Mana, as well as the special affinity you have with Magic, are what you inherited as a member of the Epilson household."

It all made sense, now that Lancelot explained it. Wasn't it a bit irregular that someone like Ciara, who was from the slums, would end up being so dangerously powerful.

She was simply too strong.

"And? What of it? What does that have to do with your decision? Are you playing favorites now?" Ciara still wouldn't budge from her request to make Jerry the new wielder of the [Judgement Arcana].

"I realize you do care about the boy. But, Ciara, a tool is only as good as the wielder's skill. I am entitled to play favorites, since it is my power, but this isn't about that. It's about your immense skill in Mind Magic—the very same kind that I have."

[Judgement] was a mind-based Arcana, and who else was better suited for it than her?

"What about Jerry?"

"He's undergoing certain tests in the other room. He won't be getting the Arcana, though. At least I was considerate of his feelings." Lancelot sighed.

"I... see..." Ciara muttered.

Her eyes fell and her mood suddenly became cloudy. It seemed like everything was happening the same as last time, for her.

Why was it that she always got the greater portion of anything, and Jerry ended up with less?

'At this point... won't he lose his drive to catch up with me?'

Ciara just kept getting stronger and stronger. It bothered her that he would eventually realize the futility of his actions and give up.

'I don't want that.'

"Well, then, Ciara. Here you go—"

"No. I don't want the Arcana. I refuse to wield it." Her voice suddenly echoed, as she boldly declared her decision.

"It's not up to your decision. If you really want to save the world, as I've seen in your memories, you need this power." Lancelot responded flatly.

"I don't care about the world, though. Only Jerry matters."

"Well, big news... Jerry lives in the world."

"I'll work my way around it."

"Sigh... how did my descendant end up becoming like this?"

The two beings grew tired of arguing, and thus began staring blankly at each other.

However, in a snap, Lancelot caused the Arcana in his grasp to slip past Ciara's guard and embed itself in her body.

"W-what did you do—?!"

"Hahaha! Now you have no choice but to accept my precious gift. It's fused with you currently. You won't be able to throw it away so easily."

"You..." The girl gritted her teeth, causing Lancelot to laugh even more.

"You'll be needing this power soon. Once you do, please don't hesitate to call for it. To protect both yourself and Jerry—and ultimately the world—you will require the power of [Judgement]."

Ciara realized that she couldn't do anything at this point. Her best bet was to simply be patient and go along with the man's wishes.

'Jared's gonna find a way around this, anyway.'

"I can hear your thoughts, you know?" Lancelot groaned in exasperation.

"Well, I don't care. By the way, do you mind if I ask you a few questions?" Ciara placed both her arms on her hips as she defiantly stared at the beautiful man in front of her.

"I would love for that, but... time's up."

"Ah, you're going already?"

"Yeah. Thanks to The [Judgement] Arcana's projection ability, I remained. However, now that it is yours... I'll naturally fade away."

Ciara was speechless. She watched as Lancelot turned into sparks of light. Little balls of energy emanated from him and he slowly lost color.

It wasn't just him, though. Everything around as well. The classy interior designs, the furniture, the carpet, the chandeliers, everything slowly faded away.

"J-just asking... erm... how strong is... this Arcana?" Ciara whispered, her cheeks flushing in slight embarrassment.

Her gaze unintentionally met Lancelot's as she hesitantly stared at him. A warm smile spread out on his face—at least what was left of it.

"Crazy strong."

Ciara didn't know why, but that made her heart feel fuzzy. She, who had decided not to give in to the power, now found herself getting increasingly excited.

"Nurture it well. Also, as for your friend, I gave him a little present as well. Not as good as an Arcana, but its decent. Consider it his consolation prize."

"I-is that so? Thank you." Ciara beamed at Lancelot's words.

"Ah, one last thing. Be careful with how you handle the Arcana. There's someone called Ciel. She's extremely dangerous, so make sure you avoid her at all costs!"

At this point, Lancelot's voice was fading fast, but his tone took on a more serious vibe than ever before.

"If you do encounter her... never try to use your Arcana. She's..."

At this point, Lancelot's voice was totally gone. His leftover state realized this, so he sighed and shrugged as a result.

'Goodbye Ciara.' His thoughts loudly echoed across the vast room, and Lancelot Epilson vanished.

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Chapter 625: Dark Arrival

The world around Ciara collapsed, and the lovely sight was replaced with an old, musty mansion.

The chairs were covered in dirt, dust, and were already broken down. The floor was dirty, the chandeliers had fallen to the ground, and everything else was a mess.

The interior was very old, and the nearly broken-down building was simply pathetic in comparison to what was shown just earlier.

"Ciara." Jerry's voice called her from behind.

As usual, a wonderful smile radiated on his face, causing the girl's heart to flutter. She forgot about the ruined building and simply focused on Jerry's lovely charm.

"Looks like everything is back to normal. You got the Arcana, right?" He asked with such innocence and curiosity that it made Ciara's heart ache for a moment.

"Y-yeah." She blurted out hesitantly.

"Sweet! At least one of us got it. I was afraid you'd fail too, but it's such a relief that you passed." Jerry placed his hands on Ciara's shoulder, proceeding with a thumbs up.

"Y-yeah..."

"We should use our Spell Cards and get out of here." Jerry rummaged through his outfit for his magic item.

It made sense that they couldn't find their Spell Cards in the illusion—though that was just Ciara at work—but now that they were in reality, Jerry assumed he would be able to find it.

Fortunately, he did.

"Alright, Ciara." He brought out his Spell Card.

Both of them drew close to each other, causing a slight air of awkwardness between them.

For the same people who had shared quite a good portion of intimacy together—even on this adventure alone—their reaction towards each other at this point felt bizarre.

"I-I'll activate it." Jerry murmured.

>SHIIIIIIINNNNNNGGGG<

His card began shining brightly, ready to warp space and allow them exit their current position. However—

>BZZZZTTTTTTZZZZ<

—The Spell suddenly failed.

Both Ciara and Jerry expressed surprise by the failure of the spell. This was the one thing they never imagined would occur.

Jerry observed his card properly, murmuring words to himself.

"What just happen—"

"Jerry, watch out!"

>BOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOMMMMMMMMMM!!!<

In a flash, the entire building was blown to bits. Every block got eviscerated by the brilliant detonation that remained a mystery.

The dark night was illuminated by the beautiful firework—or rather, the purplish, dark energy that consumed the area.

After completing the deed of destroying everything, the dark explosion fizzled out. Nothing but dust and debris now replaced the previous house.

The garden was also caught up in the blast. In fact, the entire compound had already become a sea of ash and smoke.

Thankfully, there was no blood.

"Haa... haa..." Ciara heaved with a strained breath.

A dense blue barrier covered her and the shocked boy beside her. Sweat enveloped Ciara's slightly throbbing body as she tried to recover from her dangerous action.

Thanks to exerting herself so quickly, they had been able to avoid the situation. Still, it was so risky that she had gotten very close to suffering Mana Shock.

'A second later, and I would have been too late!' Her thoughts rang.

Smoke and dust cleared the path of the malefactor as he approached. His silhouette appeared tall and lanky, as he moved in a casual manner.

Ciara kept her eyes on him while supporting Jerry, who was also recoiling from shock.

"What just... who is that?" He muttered.

They both strengthened their sight and watched the man who had just tried to kill them, approach.

'This... no way!' Ciara was the first to notice, then Jerry also realized the same.

At this point, the culprit stood a couple of meters away from the teenagers. His calm eyes and playful grin displayed nothing but malevolence.

Forbidden, twisted energy formed around him as he placed both hands within his cloak's pockets.

His brown hair flapped around, all thanks to the blowing wind, and the darkness surrounding him seemed to be dominating the area with every given moment.

"It's been a while... students." The man spoke with a friendly tone, but nothing about him indicated an ounce of goodwill.

"L-Legris... Damien...?!" Ciara and Jerry shuddered in his presence.

He seemed so very different from the last time they saw him. For one... the energy flowing around him was extremely deadly.

"Looks like you guys still remember me. That's a relief." He responded to their surprise with a friendly tone.

However, considering the fact that he had nearly blown them apart with his attack—something that was extremely difficult to survive—it was pretty logical to deduce that he had no intention of being nice.

'Is he the reason why the teleportation isn't working...?' Ciara asked herself.

Her own Spell Card was in her grasp, yet nothing was happening.

'Just how...?!'

The fact that Legris Damien confidently stood in front of them made him the prime suspect.

"What did you do?" Ciara growled.

"Hey, hey. Is that a good way to greet your former teacher?"

Ciara's eyes narrowed at the older fellow, and she clutched Jerry close to her.

The boy might have thought she was scared again, and needed his comfort, so he drew closer to her as well. However, he was sorely mistaken this time.

Ciara was indeed frightened, but the only reason she brought Jerry close was to protect him.

"I came for the Arcana. Hand it over, and no one has to get hurt." Legris grinned, drawing close to the duo.

Ciara, after hesitating for a moment, decided to betray her character.

"W-we don't have it."

'What am I doing? I should just give him the Arcana and he'll leave us alone!' Her inner self yelled at her folly, but Ciara found herself refusing to budge.

"Is that so? I would have believed you, but... I can sense Aether coming from within. You have the Arcana inside your body, Ciara." Legris's malevolent grin unnerved the two.

More sweat formed on Ciara's face as she shuddered.

"If I kill you, it should come out pretty easily, don't you think?"

"W-wait!" Ciara quickly yelled.

Despite her attempts at chivalry, there was no way she could risk her life and Jerry's.

"I-I'll give you..." She weakly muttered, rising from Jerry's grasp.

No matter what happened, there was nothing she cared about more than Jerry, and her securing their happy ending.

Fate of the world or not. Mission or not.

"If you let us go, I'll give you the Arcana."

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Chapter 626: The One To Protect [Pt 1]

"If you promise to let us go, I'll give you the Arcana!" Ciara declared in desperation.

So far, she had sensed the difference between her strength and that of the man before her.

They were akin to night and day.

"A wise choice indee—"

"NO WAY!" A loud voice interrupted the deal between the two.

It came from Jerry.

"No way! I'll never agree to this!" Jerry yelled, grabbing Ciara by her shoulders.

"We're never giving you the Arcana." His firm declaration shook the entire area.

Conviction was cemented on his face, and the boy's fiercely ignited passion shone from his eyes.

"Ciara... you don't really plan on agreeing with him, right? RIGHT?!"

The girl whose shoulder was being held felt a mix of emotions.

First, she felt her love for Jerry increase. His declaration and naïve confidence added a lot to his charm.

Second, she felt her heart race insanely. The way he gripped her shoulder, and the aggressive tone he was using... it made Ciara very excited.

Thirdly, she felt guilty. Guilty that she had indeed wanted to give in to the enemy due to the sheer difference in their abilities.

'But... what's to say Legris Damien won't kill us after he gets what he wants?' Her thoughts echoed.

In the end, wouldn't it be foolish to hand over what they had worked so hard for when there wasn't a guarantee of survival.

"O-of course, I didn't plan on giving him. Don't you trust me, Jerry? Haha..."

"I knew it! Haha!"

Both teenagers laughed, much to the villain's chagrin. He looked at the two and sighed while shaking his head.

"You guys, really... oh well, I have been nice enough."

Dark energy began rising from Legris as his body became shrouded in subtle darkness.

'Ah, this is bad. I should have just taken the deal...' She gulped slightly.

The usual Ciara Epilson was very confident. Since she was extremely powerful, almost anyone she fought was fodder.

Even against stronger enemies like Gawain, during training, it hadn't been as though there was anything at stake.

But now... being confronted with an actual evil, she felt exposed to new emotions that made her feel dazed.

"Don't worry, Ciara. I'll protect you!" Jerry stood in front of the girl as the darkness around Legris swelled.

"W-what—?!"

The boy turned back and smiled at her, giving her a thumbs up. He flashed a lovely smile that rendered the poor girl instantly smitten.

"Lancelot gave me a little something... and I'll use that power to protect you, Ciara." He smiled.

Power suddenly began emerging from Jerry, causing Ciara's eyes to widen in surprise. She had never sensed this type of energy before—especially from someone like Jerry.

It felt so similar... to the power that had been around Lancelot and the area that surrounded her back when they'd met the Apostle of Aether. This power was....

>BOOOOOOOOOOOOMMMMM<

In a burst of bright light, Jerry became doused with pure white flames. He combined his usual ability with the newfound one he'd gained, creating a new one.

"Elemental Chamber: White Armament!"

Instantly, the flames around him converged and formed a shell that encased his body. Like a light, compressed armor of fire, the white fire brimmed with even greater intensity than ever before.

The entire area quaked in response to Jerry's sudden transformation. It seemingly burned though even space, as everything around Jerry warped like an unstable incineration.

"Interesting. I didn't think you guys would be able to use Aether already. So that's the Aether I sensed within you too..." Legris Damien smiled, narrowing his eyes to observe the boy who wanted to fight him.

"J-Jerry..." Ciara muttered hesitantly.

Her heart was racing so incredibly that it was difficult to form words. She hadn't seen Jerry look so cool before. In his current state, even she wasn't certain she could handle him.

This new power that Legris dubbed as Aether... it was simply beyond her capabilities.

"Ciara..." The boy's flaming body shifted a little, and his smile was once again flashed in her direction.

"... Allow me to protect you this time."

"A-ah..." Her heart raced even faster—if that was even possible.

Flickering, fluttering flames lit up the darkness, in the form of a man. And Ciara thought she was gazing at an angel.

Her guardian angel.

Being the weaker one for the first time didn't feel surprisingly bad. Her heart was sent out to Jerry and she wished with all her heart... that he would be her knight.

'Jerry... I'm counting on you.'

"Hahaha. Isn't this cute? Both of you really—"

>WHOOOOOSSSHHHH<

Leaving a trail of heat and distorted space behind him, Jerry sharply lunged at Legris. His speed was beyond what a normal person would consider perceivable, and his charge was akin to a comet.

The flaming boy prepared the strongest punch he had ever thrown in his life, hoping to get one in as soon as possible.

>FWOOOOOSSSHHHH<

He launched the strike, sending shockwaves permeating through the area, and it closed in on the target.

However—

"What are you doing?"

Legris Damien suddenly appeared behind Jerry. He whispered in the boy's ears with an amused smile on his face.

'E-eh...?!' Confused and frightened, Jerry felt all the hair on his skin stand.

How could a target that was right in front of him suddenly vanish behind him? Was he just so fast? Was it teleportation? Jerry swiftly moved his body to react to his opponent, but suddenly found Legris right in front of him again.

'W-what?! I don't understa—'

>BOOOOOOOOOOOOMMMMM<

The one who threw the first successful punch was Legris, and it connected perfectly with his target.

Jerry, on the other hand, felt his brain tremble as the blow landed on his cheek.

Unable to breathe or react, he could only feel himself being helplessly thrust in the direction he came from.

>BOOOOOOOOOOOOMMMMM!!!<

His crash generated a massive crater, and for a few seconds, Jerry was too dazed to even move.

His flickering white flames had protected him from a great deal of the injury, but Jerry was still recoiling from the shock.

"You both have things very backwards here. If you think you can beat me, you're sorely mistaken." Legris smiled.

He began advancing towards the two, his aura of malevolence growing thicker.

"I'll be killing you now."

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Chapter 627: The One To Protect [Pt 2]

>WHOOOOOSSSHHHH<

Jerry raced forward, clenching his fists with resolve, as he pushed his speed to the limit.

Sure, he had suffered a severe blow from Legris, but he swiftly got up to attack. If he failed, the chances of being killed was high.

However, there was one whose life he wanted to preserve even more.

'You will not be hurting Ciara!' His thoughts echoed as his white flames burned through everything around him.

Being a bit experienced in Martial Arts, Jerry utilized the techniques he knew to balance the power gap that existed between him and his opponent.

Becoming a blur and swiftly escaping Legris Damien's hits were very difficult—as each blow sent shockwaves flying around—but he managed regardless.

The problem, however, was landing a hit himself.

'How am I supposed to hit him if I'm on the defensive!'

"Not bad." Legris grinned excitedly, steadily engaging in a dance with the more desperate Jerry.

"Shut it!"

Jerry was boiling with rage... as well as impatience. Time was running out for him, and he couldn't manifest his power for much longer.

"Rarrggghhh!!!"

>BOOOOOOOOOOMMMMMM<

Jerry's blow sent debris of scorched rocks flying everywhere, and the landscape was further ruined.

The dark night brightened due to his brilliant explosion, and loud echoes reverberated through the whole vicinity.

This level of destruction far exceeded what he could accomplish in the past—enough for even Ciara to marvel at.

"Haaa... haaa..." Jerry's strained breath leaked out.

His glowing body suddenly lost all its luster, and he returned to his mediocre state. Sweat broke out of his skin, and his heavy panting echoed throughout the vicinity.

If it wasn't clear enough to anyone, the situation was pretty obvious to him.

'I'm spent!'

He trembled, struggling to move away from the site of destruction that seemed to spread for miles.

Having wreaked more havoc than he had expected to, Jerry found himself a little proud of his achievement. However, he was vulnerable in his current state.

The thick smoke and heated floors would inadvertently damage him if he wasn't careful. Thus, he had to step away.

'Haa... did I do it, though?' Jerry wondered as he moved.

His chest tightened when he saw Ciara at a distance. She was giving him an expression he hadn't expected.

'C-Ciara...?'

He had just given it his all to defeat the enemy. It had taken everything he'd had, but he'd succeeded, hadn't he?

'I won. You don't... you don't have to be scared anymore.'

Despite Jerry's thoughts, though, Ciara didn't seem to be getting any happier.

Her expression soured, and her eyes bulged in surprise. He couldn't understand it. He had just won, yet why wasn't she giving him a smile.

"W-why...?"

That was when Jerry realized it—something he had failed to notice until he carefully observed Ciara's eyes. They weren't directed at him—no.

Her eyes gazed at something beyond the tired boy. It was—

"Jerry, watch out!!!"

—Something coming from behind him!

>SQUELCH<

Blood spurted out of his pierced body.

The red liquid oozed to the ground, forming a small pool underneath the fatally wounded person, while also dripping onto the person who was beneath the injured body.

"N-no..." Jerry's eyes widened as he saw someone bleeding above him.

She was radiantly beautiful, even as blood dripped from her lips. Her body was completely shrouded in her favorite transformation—Mage Mode.

"... Ciara!!!" Jerry screamed, watching the wounded girl smile even though she was pierced by dark tentacle spikes in several areas.

"A-are you alright... Jerry?" Her voice was barely audible, and it contained so much pain that it was heartbreaking to hear.

"I... I..." Jerry's eyes were rapidly filled with tears—so much tears that his vision blurred.

He had failed woefully! He'd tried his hardest, and yet he had failed to defeat the enemy. And now, even the girl he had sought to protect was in a terrible state.

He felt extremely frustrated. Yet... even as his heart ached, he couldn't bring himself to look away from the girl who sacrificed herself for him.

It should have been him, yet—

"W-why...?" Tears streamed from Jerry's eyes as he whispered.

Why did she do it? She should have lived! She was more powerful than him anyway. She was the one in possession of the Arcana. She shouldn't have died for him.

How could she—!!!

"Because... I like you a little bit, Jerry." She smiled at him.

The way her blue eyes captured his own, and how her glossy lips curled up at that statement, moved the boy's heart.

For the first time ever, he felt it race uncontrollably.

His face became hot, and he found himself staring at the lady in front of him with disbelief. For the first time ever... his eyes saw a different Ciara.

"I-I'm so... I'm so..."

Overwhelmed by the new feelings swirling within him, Ciara's injured state, and how exhausted his body already was; Jerry found everything too much to bear.

And as a result, he fainted.

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"Eh...?" Ciara's eyes widened slightly upon seeing the boy she protected faint.

It was a little surprising, since this wasn't what she was expecting at all. Even after her self sacrifice and how she had perfectly executed her lines, this wasn't what was meant to happen next!

"Uh? He's unconscious already? For real?" She was dazed beyond words.

"How surprising. You seem fine even after taking all of those attacks." A voice emanated from the rubble.

It belonged to none other than Legris Damien, who emerged with his strange dark energy swirling around him.

"It's just a clone. I'm not stupid enough to run into danger." Ciara's wounded self smiled, before vanishing like smoke.

The blood that stained the boy and the ground also dissipated, leaving an unconscious Jerry in the hands of a completely healthy Ciara.

Legris stood at a distance, hands in his pocket, as he gave a quizzical expression.

"Don't look so surprised. I only did what I had to do." Ciara muttered, glancing slightly at her unconscious partner.

"Oh? And what's that?"

The girl smiled.

She carried Jerry and placed him in a safe corner—using Magic to serve as a protective barrier.

Once she was fine, Ciara approached Legris with an expression that betrayed the ones she had displayed prior to this very moment.

"Jerry's chivalry was appreciated. I love how he wanted to protect me, and he did everything he could to achieve that goal." Her lips curled up, widening her smile even more.

"However... in the end, he's still too weak to protect me."

Legris chuckled slightly, shaking his head in both disbelief and amusement. He was amazed by the expression his opponent was making.

Ciara's blushing face contained a daring smile, and her stance showed that she was ready for battle.

"The one who will protect Jerry is me!"

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Chapter 628: Mind's World

"So... you'll fight against me?"

Legris was much faster than anything Ciara had ever seen. His mysterious abilities also didn't make much sense to her.

'Not only did he not die after Jerry's final attack, but he had suffered no damage too...'

Ciara found herself wondering how exactly to best the man in front of her.

'Mind attacks aren't working. I already tried. My Magic abilities—even in Mage Mode—aren't as strong as Jerry's assault.'

In the end, she found herself backed into a corner. Legris Damien was simply too strong and mysterious for her.

"Of course. Who else is here to fight?" Ciara grinned maniacally.

Legris Damien's eyes widened in surprise. This girl kept surprising him at every turn.

"I'm fascinated. For a second there, I thought you were actually... the damsel in distress."

The image of Ciara sacrificing herself to save Jerry was now tainted by her expression which was akin to insanity. The pure and kind persona had completely evaporated.

"Ciara Epilson, the magic genius with the Special Grade Mana Core, and one of the strongest in her generation. I suppose it's only right for you to get messed up in the head."

"Awww. Thanks for the compliment, retard. Only Jerry gets to compliment me. Don't be a creep, you're not my type at all."

Ciara's bark, even with the smile on her face, made Legris all the more amazed. Still, he couldn't forget his mission, now could he?

"I'll spare you if you just give me the Arcana. I don't think I want to kill someone like you, or your boyfriend." He sighed.

"B-b-boyfriend?! W-who told you that?! What gave you that impression?!"

Ciara's sudden transition confused Legris even further. He was simply caught in a daze.

"I was just—"

"F-flattery won't get you anywhere, y-you know? I'm never giving you the Arcana! Jerry would be disappointed in me if I did!"

After Ciara's declaration, there was silence. Both opponents stared at each other—none directed animosity towards the other, surprisingly.

Legris ended the brief moment of silence with a sigh.

"You know what? I give up. There's no point. I'll just kill you and get my prize."

He was tired of trying to figure the girl out. She just seemed too messed up in the end to bother.

Besides, Legris had other people to think about.

"Give it your best shot!" She declared, stretching out her hand and beckoning him to draw nearer.

"Very well..."

>WHOOOOOSSSHHHH<

In a single stroke of the wind, Legris closed the distance between himself and Ciara, burying his hand deep into her chest.

"Eeek! You pervert! You have no idea where you just touched, do you?" Her voice sharply emerged from behind Legris, causing the man to glance back in shock.

"What did you...?!"

"I always knew you were a creep!"

Ciara was perfectly fine, and the one Legris had stabbed suddenly vanished into thin air. It was mind boggling.

"What sort of trick are you using?" He asked with narrowed gaze.

"Why should I tell you?"

Tension rose between the two, and finally a chuckle arose from the older fellow.

"Hehe... hehehe... hahaha..."

Ciara was creeped out by the sudden burst of laughter, but she did her best to contain her surprise and disgust.

"I see what's happening now." Legris Damien's voice echoed even louder.

He was genuinely amused. So much so that Ciara was beginning to get nervous.

"You actually managed to trap me inside the Mind's World, didn't you? So you already know how to use the [Judgement] Arcana. As expected of an Epilson, I suppose."

Ciara's eyes instantly widened. Not only because Legris deciphered everything she had been up to, but because of his knowledge about her identity—something she had only just found out about.

"How do you know so much?" She blurted out in suspicious curiosity.

For a moment, Legris kept quiet... until he found the best way to answer her question.

"Why should I tell you?"

A vein or two appeared on Ciara's face. She didn't appreciate someone copying her words, but she was also aware that her enemy wasn't going to divulge information to her.

In this situation, her Original Magic wasn't useful since she couldn't affect his mind at all.

'It's because of this strange energy that he has...'

The power simply repelled hers.

However, she wasn't entirely disadvantaged. After all, so what if he knew about his current predicament? It wasn't like he could escape from it?

"I have to admit, you caught me well. I don't know when you activated it, but you were quite subtle. It doesn't matter, though."

>BZZZTTTTZZZ<

The area around suddenly started to melt. The landscape, the sky, the ground. They slowly decomposed and lost all shape and form.

"U-uh...??" Ciara wondered what was happening.

One second, her world was upright, and the next... it was breaking apart. Of course, she knew there could only be one architect.

'What did he do?!' She couldn't ask the man, because he wouldn't even respond to her.

"You aren't the only one with an Arcana, you know?" Legris smiled as he relished the confusion written on Ciara's face.

"E-even if you have an Arcana, you shouldn't be able to use it! Your actual body is paralyzed since your mind is trapped here. There's no way you can activate your Arcana remotely!" She yelled in response.

It was unlike Ciara to lose her composure, but this was the best way she knew to contain the situation and also protect Jerry.

There was no other way to fully battle Legris without putting Jerry in a risk of danger. No matter what barrier she used, Ciara felt her opponent would still be able to break through it and use the boy she loved as leverage.

If it came to that, she would have no other choice but to abandon her mission and give him the Arcana. The only problem was whether he would honor a deal or not.

It was something Ciara didn't want to have to find out, so it was better not to take any chances, to begin with.

'But it's too late now...'

In a flash of light, the Mind's World completely dissolved, and reality set in.

Legris stood confidently on one end, while Ciara—holding Jerry tightly—knelt a distance from him.

A bead of sweat dripped from her face as she struggled to find a better solution.

'... What should I do now?!

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Chapter 629: Uneven Struggle

'What should I do now?' Ciara found her thoughts wavering as she stared down Legris Damien.

He approached with a menacing aura, and she realized that it wouldn't take very long before he made short work of her and Jerry.

'Even if I use Bond Magic now...' She thought to herself.

Combining Fusion Mode and Mage Mode had to be her greatest form, but she doubted that was going to make much of a difference.

'Still... I have to try!'

>VWUUUUSSSHHH<

Ciara's body was instantly enveloped in dense Magic, and several stars appeared around her. Her body shone like an oily surface, and numerous star particles danced around her.

'If I knew how to use the Arcana more, it would have been better, but...'

The Mind's World was the only ability she had access to, and that was only possible because she had experienced it herself.

It was certain that there were more features of the [Judgement] Arcana, but she was currently too unskilled to handle it.

The only thing she could currently do was to give it her all.

"Interesting. You have a Constellation as a Familiar. I've never seen anyone chosen by them before... well, except one person." Legris Damien grinned as he laid eyes on her magnificent form.

Ciara was gleaming in her bright blue Mage's attire, surrounded by numerous clusters of stars.

Her brown hair had now transformed into white, and her blue eyes had bright sparks within.

Fusing with her Familiar made her transcend to her current state—Grand Fusion Mage Mode.

Ciara retreated to the air, holding Jerry in her grasp. In her current state, she could do many things, but her priority was protecting her partner.

'I'll launch long-distance attacks and keep my distance.'

Mind attacks didn't work, and she doubted the Mind's World would be very effective the second time.

"Let's do this!"

>WHOOOOSSSHHHH<

Ciara darted to the sky, hoping to create as big a distance from Legris as possible. Even if it was to abandon the building they were currently in, she was determined to do everything to escape.

"Not impressive enough." Legris instantly launched himself into the air.

'Tch!' She thought to herself.

She was moving faster than even Jerry had been, yet it didn't seem to faze her opponent in the slightest.

>VWOOOOOMMMM!!!<

Ciara sent dozens of her stars flying in Legris Damien's direction. Each of them possessed massive destructive abilities.

'They can slow him down, at the very least...' The desperate maiden had thought.

Unfortunately, Legris had even better skills than she anticipated

He bypassed all the stars she sent in his direction, swiftly dodging her projectiles while blocking her meaningless magical strikes.

"Damnit!" She cursed, watching as he caught up with her.

The heavy and musty night breeze whipped her in the face, but she ignored everything and solely tried to escape.

"Just leave us alone!"

>BOOOOOOOOOOOOMMMMM!!!<

A brilliant combination of flames and wind, in addition to the eruption of several stars were launched in Legris's ascending direction.

However—

>FWISH<

Legris increased his speed, overwhelmingly breaking through the devastation. His mysterious dark energy easily passed through the deadly strike, and he emerged unscathed.

"W-wha—?!"

It only took a few moments for him to catch up to Ciara and Jerry, causing the flying girl to shriek in shock.

Once he got ahead of them, Legris sent his power in Ciara's direction.

"G-garh!!!" The poor girl felt her body shiver, and her entire form instantly collapsed.

'W-what? I can't use... Mana?!'

Mage Mode dissipated, and her Familiar's manifestation became compromised. All the stars around her darkened, and she lost control over the energy that usually made everything much easier.

"D-damnit!"

Ciara felt herself descend from her height, unable to even control her position in the air.

"Perhaps I should help."

Legris stood above her, pointing a finger that reeked of negative energy. Sparks of darkness emerged from his fingertips, and it was certain that her time of execution had arrived.

In an instant, he was going to blow her away with his power, and there was nothing Ciara could do about it.

>BZZZZTTTTTTZZZZZ<

Ciara's powerlessness made her want to cry out, but the shock prevented her quivering lips from moving.

Ultimately, she could do nothing but feel the wave of evil power wash over her.

>BOOOOOOOOOOOOMMMMM!!!!<

The dark lightning consumed everything around Ciara, including her and the boy she tightly hugged.

Drops of tears fell from her eyes as she gritted her teeth in frustration.

And thus, even the ground that received a portion of Legris Damien's assault instantly ruptured.

The earth parted, and debris flew in multiple directions.

The old house which had stood erect before was instantly torn down, and everything became a pile of broken-down rocks and decaying wood.

"Haa... why am I not surprised?" Legris Damien softly spoke as his smile increased.

He was suspended in the air, but his gaze was focused on a view behind him.

Even though he had just incinerated the girl and her friend, he wasn't the slightest bit interested in the devastation he'd caused.

That was because—

"So, you finally show your face after all this time, eh?" Legris turned behind him to look at the small group that had appeared.

His darkened gaze picked up a certain blond boy and his comrades.

With them were the two he had almost killed. Apparently, they had been rescued before being consumed by his attack.

"Not going to say anything?" Legris raised his voice, the wicked smile on his face getting bigger.

The one he spoke to was none other than a young man. His hair swayed with the wind, and his focused stare was enough to strike fear into the hearts of many—not Legris, though.

They both stared at each other, the tension rising on both ends.

"It's been a while, Legris." The boy finally spoke.

The people he was with also seemed to share the same sentiment. They all donned serious expressions on their faces—equally cautious, but also determined.

"You came for the Arcana, didn't you? It's too bad though..." The blonde smiled.

The helpless two were now under his care, and he didn't seem to have any intention of letting Legris have his way.

"... They're mine now."

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Chapter 630: United Front

'Haa... what a mess.'

Why did things have to end up this way? Why, of all people, did I have to be confronted with Legris Damien?

"You had better give up now." A daunting smile formed on my face as I tried my hardest to radiate confidence.

My opponent, the very same person who had outsmarted me the last time, didn't seem too scared by my sudden appearance—even when I had backup with me.

Edward, Lemi, and Ivan were also with me as backup.

While I knew that none of them could really prove to be much of a threat to the enemy, it felt smarter to rely on the mirage of strength in numbers.

In the worst scenario, I would simply transport everyone back to the base while fighting Legris myself.

"What a surprise, Jared. You can use Aether now? I wasn't expecting this development so soon..." Legris laughed, clapping his hands.

As always, he threw me off guard. I couldn't tell if he was lying about his surprise or not, though the former seemed more plausible.

'He's trying to misdirect me again. I won't underestimate you, Legris.'

In any case, Ciara and Jerry seemed to be in a rough shape.

For Jerry, he must have exerted himself too much—enough to render him unconscious. As for Ciara, she had to have been exposed to a huge wave of Nether. It must have affected her ability to use Mana, as well as weakening her considerably.

'Her body doesn't seem to be in good condition... though it's getting better on its own.' My thoughts rang as I thoroughly observed her body.

It most likely had to with the Arcana in her possession. It made me glad that they had completed their mission.

'That leaves only Neron and Serah.' A smile formed on my face.

Of course, that only depended on the possibility of us winning this round against Legris.

"You know, we're a horrible matchup. Even if you have Aether, the possibility of beating me is low." Legris grinned.

"I'm more amazed that you can use Nether. How long have you had access to it?" I swiftly responded, narrowing my eyes in curiosity.

In the past, I couldn't tell what energy he had that made me so frightened. However, I now understood it to be Nether.

The problem, however, was how he was able to utilize it so freely. Regular people—no, even powerful beings—weren't supposed to be utilizing Nether as freely as Legris did.

"Ah, that. I've always been able to use it... I think."

His response made it seem as though it was only natural. And that seemed off for so many reasons.

"No... back at Ainzlark, you didn't have this power. I don't know how you were able to pull off your escape, or how you survived my Spell, but..."

It wasn't until after that moment that Legris began exhibiting this new ability. Granted, he could have hidden his ability from everyone. However...!!!

"I refuse to believe you wouldn't have used Nether to stop me back then."

Did he play me at that point? Had he been in no actual danger when I cornered him that time? Was everything just a fool's crusade?

I had many questions, but I kept my cool regardless.

"Ohh, so that's what you mean. I don't believe you have any right to know any of that, Jared. I mean... why should I tell you?" Legris laughed in response.

He was definitely right about his answer. Even if he gave me a response, there was no genuine reason to believe him. In the end, I wouldn't be able to get a definite answer.

"Just so you know, Jared, you actually won that time. I'll admit that I was cornered with no way to escape. It's not easy admitting a loss, but I admit that one."

Was he trying to appeal to my ego? Trying to make me a bit more confident and careless?

'Not a chance!'

"You say that, yet you were able to win in a game with much higher stakes." I responded.

'Alright. I've bought enough time. I've restored Ciara's and Jerry's energy with Resonance. Plus, we're ready to move anytime.'

My [Strength] Arcana was also on standby, in case Legris pulled out his Nether to interfere with my Original Magic.

'I really don't want to fight with him since I have barely gotten a hang of the power.'

If Legris was telling the truth about his masterful experience with Nether—which was believable, to be honest—then I was probably screwed in a fight.

"Yeah. Fair enough. I'm not arguing that I'm superior to you, Jared. At this point, even Neron is..." He chuckled slightly.

'Is he implying that he can beat Neron?' I couldn't tell truth or lie apart with the man in front of me.

"What will you do now?" I prepared myself, stirring the energy within me.

It still took time—no matter how little—to teleport. The rest would have to escape while I covered them.

'Thank goodness Asa, Maro, and Vida are still in the base. Less people to worry about...'

"I mean, you guys must have a ton of Arcanas, right? Why would I let any of you escape my grasp?"

As expected, he was going to engage. Why would a member of the Nether Cult skip on his chance to obtain a good number of Arcanas—especially since they were gathered in one place.

'That's not going to happen, though.' I glared at him.

"Alright, Jared. Shall we begin our next round?" Legris released his Nether, causing the entire area around him to be shrouded in unpleasant darkness.

"Tch..." I conjured the energy in [Strength] and spread the power of Aether around me and my allies.

Any moment now, I would forcefully teleport them away.

They would simply be a burden to me, at this point. I couldn't afford for any of them to slow me down. Besides, the Arcanas were—

"Here I come, Jared."

Shockwaves sent even the earth parting as Legris made to close the distance between me and him in one swift motion.

'Shit! Here goes!'