

SPELLCRAFT 1121

SPELLCRAFT: Reincarnation Of A Magic Scholar

Chapter 1121: Reality Check

"Are you alright, Lewis?"

"Yeah. You're looking kind of pale."

"You mentioned my son's name. Is everything alright?"

Aria, Drake, and Larry all asked me with their eyes connoting evidence of worry.

"Yeah, yeah. I'm fine. Your son's name just reminded me of someone where I'm from who shares the same name." I responded, calming myself as I settled.

"Ah, I see. Well, it's not exactly a unique name." Larry smiled. "What kind of person was he?"

Hearing that question caused me to remember how Jared felt about that man.

There was only one answer I could give at this point.

"He's like me."

"Like you? He must be a great fellow, then." Larry had no idea what I meant by 'like me', but I appreciated his sentiment.

Legris and I both shared the same past, and the same obsession with Magic.

But... we were clearly different.

'No one in the Nether Realm exists in the Aether Realm and vice versa. Sure, in the various branches within a realm, variations of a person may exist, but the two realms never have an existence in common.'

There was no Jared Leonard in the Nether Realm, just as there was no Larry Damien in the Aether Realm.

Sure, due to certain circumstances, there were bound to be some similar histories and titles in certain branches that parallel the other branch.

Concepts like Fairy King, or Great Sage, existed in both Realms. However, as long as the Roots were different, no character could ever be the same.

'Could it be that Legris... is the Lewis of this world?'

If that was the same, then I wasn't dealing with just someone who was similar to me.

No. I was dealing with the 'ME' of an inverted realm.

The ME that was always bound to fail.

'It's just as Libra said. This world's natural order ensures evil triumphs good. Despair is the norm here. That's the kind of person the Nether is, so his realm will be designed like this.'

Both realms had good and evil, but in the Aether world, it seemed good found ways to constantly triumph.

This was due to the Aether's nature.

However, if I applied the same to the Nether, it meant the echoes of despair and chaos were the preferred setting.

In such a world, Legris Damien was bound to be corrupted.

'That's what makes us different.'

"I have to go now. I'm really sorry I couldn't help you any more, you three. Even if you looked forward to this so much." I rose to my feet and swiftly left for the door.

There was a lot more to do than I realized.

"LEWIS!" Larry called my name, causing me to sharply turn back.

I was very anxious at this point, and impatience was clearly displayed on my face.

Yet, the mere sight of all three of them melted my heart and drove all those overwhelming feelings away in an instant.

"Thank you for everything, Lewis." Larry bowed his head as he offered a genuine, natural smile.

"I know you killed my sisters to protect us. I hold nothing against you, Lewis. You are a good man, Lewis." Aria smiled too, her head bowed.

"You've done more than we could ever have thought possible for this world, Lewis. Thank you." Drake nodded, his head lowered in a bow.

All three of them offered me their sincere gratitude and respect.

"You guys..." I could feel tears forming in my eyes as I stared at them. My vision grew blurry due to the accumulating liquid, and I didn't realize it when I formed a smile.

"Thank you so much."

These people. This world. This Realm. All of it had shown me much more than I ever thought possible.

The three friends sat in a circle after Lewis left them, their faces more cheerful than one would expect.

They had just been told that they would never see their loved ones again. Yet, the genuine smiles on their faces didn't vanish.

Instead, the more they stared at each other, the more their grins widened.

"We're all still best friends, right?" Aria was the first to break the silence with her words.

"Of course." Drake responded, and so a smile began to slowly form at the corner of his lips. "Though... I can only expect things to change very soon."

"What do you mean by that, Drake?" Larry gasped, most definitely apalled by what his friend was insinuating.

Was he trying to say they wouldn't remain best friends.

"Yeah, what nonsense are you spouting, Drake?" Aria added.

"Oh, nothing. It's just... I look at my two friends now and can't help but think that the two of them might soon become... ahem... ahem..." He made a mock cough.

His smile grew wider as his eyes narrowed.

Surely, no one would be dense enough not to understand what that meant at this point.

"W-w-w-w-what the hell, Drake?!" Aria was the first to burst out with stuttering words as her face took on a pinkish hue.

There was no way she could overlook what Drake had just insinuated.

Her and Larry... becoming what exactly?

It was true that now Larry wasn't bound by his mission to bring back his family, and he intended to live his life to the fullest.

That meant Larry was currently single, and possibly searching.

And Aria... well Aria was...

"Kyaaaaa! Stop iiiit!" She screamed, holding both her cheeks as she ran out of the room, most likely too embarrassed to look at the blushing Larry's face.

One would never expect a hardened warrior to display such a feminine side to herself.

"What did you say that for, Drake?" Larry sighed as he held his forehead. He didn't know how to respond to his still grinning friend.

"Welp, I just stated the truth. You've known for a while that Aria likes you, right? And now that you're single, might as well just kickstart things."

"Y-you! And who says I like her back? Or that I'm ready to get back in the game?" This time, it was Larry's turn to get flustered.

Not many things could faze the Great Sage of this world, but even he had his limits.

"Pfft! Who are you decieving? I see how you stare at her sometimes, you lecherous man. I wonder how painful it was to hold it in your pants all these years..."

"S-shut up! It's not my fault. I'm a man, and I... I have needs, you know?"

"Hahaha! At least you're honest with yourself now." Drake burst out laughing even more.

"But Aria deserves better. She should be with—"

"You. She likes you, so I think she wants to be with you. If you're not man enough to handle it, don't blame it on her."

Drake had always had his way with his tongue when he decided to get serious. Larry could see that now.

"F-fine... I'll try." Larry finally gave in.

Drake was right, after all.

Now that they had saved the world and stopped the threat of the triumvirate, all the tension that kept him serious had vanished.

They were now replaced by the pent-up stress he had ignored all this time, and it was finally beginning to get to him.

"... I'll try."

Now, both Drake and Larry couldn't have known this, but Aria was listening in to their conversation from outside the room, so she had heard everything.

At some point, her cheeks flushed with deeper red, and other times, she tried her best to stop herself from laughing.

It wasn't too difficult to maintain her cover since she was a Magic Swordsman, and the two conversing were pretty much weak.

Still, she felt like she had almost lost control and given herself away on multiple occasions.

Thankfully, that didn't happen.

'So he likes me too...' Aria smiled, clenching her hands to form a fist. She jerked it in the air, cheering for herself in victory.

In the end, she had won his heart.

It wasn't all in vain!

... And unknown to the two men conversing, as well as Aria, someone else was watching this entire thing and listening in to all that happened.

The Ursula.

"I see. So this is how it works." The Automaton murmured silently as she stealthily hovered above the bunch.

Aria's excited face. Drake's mischievous smile. Larry's nervous face.

She internalized all of it and assimilated all the information. With her current base knowledge of empathy forming a codex within her, the Ursula began to analyze everything she was receiving.

She did this until a particular inquiry popped into her mind.

"Will I... find love too?"

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Chapter 1122: The Dying World

Once I was done with Larry and the others, I knew I needed a breather, so I teleported to an isolated area in the far north—away from any sense of familiarity, and devoid of life.

I just wanted some time to think.

Floating as I stared at the star-filled sky, brimming in the vastness of darkness all around, I smiled to myself.

This world was truly beautiful.

"So this is where you were..." A voice broke me out of my thoughts, though I could already sense the presence of the owner before she spoke.

Hearing her words made my smile broaden even more.

"Stop saying that as if you didn't know that already." Glancing behind me, I saw Karlia floating there.

She had her arms folded, and a smile on her face. Her violet eyes locked onto mine, and as she drew closer, I could feel my heart racing.

"Fair enough." She retorted, still drawing closer.

Karlia's and I had used Soul Brands on ourselves, just like I did with Jane all those years ago. In essence, she could tell where I was and vice versa.

Even without the Brand, however, I doubted someone like her would have any problem locating me.

Not as long as I was within the same universe she was in.

"What's on your mind? You seem troubled." She asked, her arms wrapped around my shoulder.

I gave a light chuckle once I felt the warmth of her skin on mine.

"What gave it away? The Soul Brand?"

"Pfft! What? I don't need a Soul Brand to know when my man is upset. What's the matter, Lewis?" She asked once more.

It wasn't like I wanted to hide anything from Karlia, but it was sometimes to voice out my thoughts.

What I just needed was a bit of time to sort them out... and I would finally be able to express them.

"The problem with this world... the loss of so many souls, and its inevitable crumbling, it's because we stopped the Nether from invading our world."

Without the Nether, the dead souls couldn't be recycled to form new souls. And so, only existing souls would be transferred to form more existent ones.

That wasn't sustainable.

"The more people die, the less the total mass of souls become. Without any way to recycle them, the souls will thin out, diminishing over time."

In essence... this world would soon run out of souls to operate on.

"The Nether Realm is dying. And it's because of us." I locked gazes with Karlia and offered a tired smile.

"And the worst part is that I don't know how to correct it."

I couldn't even restore the Souls that belonged to the loved ones of my friends. How much more the souls of not just a branch, but the entire Nether Tree.

I was stuck.

"Is that all?" Karlia's voice suddenly made my worries dissipate into a void of bright embers.

"H-huh?"

She gave me a smile that made it seem like everything I was saying... was no problem.

Just what in the world was she thinking?

"Don't tell me... you can solve the problem?" My eyes bulged as I stared at Karlia's confident smile.

How could I have forgotten? Karlia was an excellent Magic Researcher. Not only had she found a way to make herself virtually immortal, but she kept researching various aspects of Magic in order to bring me back.

Plus, she had so many abilities that she had collected over the years.

Finally... she was currently stronger than ever.

'If there's anyone that can solve this, it could most probably be her!'

"You're overestimating my abilities, Lewis. Of course I can't do that much." Karlia stopped me dead in my tracks as she laughed, patting my shoulder with her surprisingly soft hands.

"W-what?"

"I mean, yes, I have delved into Magic a lot, and I know my considerable share of it... but I still couldn't revive you without the conventional means, talkless of solving a problem as huge as this."

'Ah, that's true.' In terms of difficulty, the current situation was far more difficult.

"Plus, this is the Nether Realm. The established laws in the Aether Realm don't apply here. I'll have to learn a lot from scratch and build from the ground up."

That was also true. It seemed Karlia had already considered the possibilities.

"Even if we pool our thoughts together to come up with a solution, it's going to take a considerably long period before we can do anything. And at that point, it'll probably be too late."

The more Karlia spoke, the more hopeless the situation seemed.

Why in the world was she so confident earlier? If the situation was as bad as I thought, then why was she brimming with so much confidence?

"Relax, Lewis. We don't need to solve the problem. We should just delegate to those who were designed to do so." As soon as she said those words and placed her hands on my shoulders, I suddenly realized what she meant.

The Constellations!

"If it's them, they should be able to pull it off!"

Not only were they limitless in the Nether Root, but they were designed to govern various aspects of existence within the Nether Realm.

Creating a sustainable system in the absence of the Nether was something they could do!

"You're a genius, Karlia! Ah... but the problem is how to convince them to cooperate."

Libra's words still remained in my mind.

'This world operates on chaos and despondency. If that is the natural order of things here... it's more likely they will allow their world to die.'

That was probably the reason the Constellations hadn't done anything yet despite being aware of the problem.

"Lewis, don't worry about that." Once again, Karlia's confident tone danced in my ears, and she took all of my attention.

Her eyes brimmed with such confidence that it gave me an irrational sense of assurance.

"Just leave it to me."

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Chapter 1123: Hope For Existence

"Hey, Libra!"

Karlia's voice suddenly soared as she raised her eyes into the starry sky. Her contained the residual confidence she had been displaying, but a certain seriousness was etched on it as well.

'What is she doing? Calling a Constellation like that... don't tell me—!' My eyes widened as I interchanged glances from Karlia and the sky she intently looked at.

"I know you can hear me. I also know you understand what the current situation is. You and your Constellation buddies better rectify this problem, you hear me?"

I shivered as I heard Karlia speak. She had such an authoritative tone that it made me a bit anxious about the results.

'Sure, she beat Libra, but if all the Constellations gang up on her... no, even if she'll be fine, I don't think we should intentionally piss them off.'

The Constellations were the only ones who could solve the current problem, after all. Wasn't it better to resolve things diplomatically?

'But Karlia should know that. She must have her reasons for taking this approach...' I focused my gaze on Karlia once more, watching how serious she appeared.

"I said... you hear me?" Her tone grew darker, and her eyes narrowed, clearly forming a threat.

My worry instantly skyrocketed, and at this point I was tempted to intervene.

However...

~SHIIINNNNGGG!~

... It turned out my worries were unnecessary.

As soon as Karlia finished her last statement, brilliant glows of light appeared in the sky, and the stars above us began to huddle together in order to form words.

Yes! Actual words.

~YES. WE UNDERSTAND.~ The words stated.

I couldn't believe my eyes.

"What in the...?" I could hear myself mumble underneath my breath.

"You see, Lewis? It's going to be okay." She told me, her smile growing ever so brighter.

I was rendered speechless by everything, so the only thing I could do at this point was nod at her words.

There was still hope for this new world, after all!

I wasn't sure they could do anything about those who were already dead. Chances were that even the Constellations couldn't solve that dilemma since it was in the realm of the Nether's jurisdiction, and he was pretty much nonexistent now.

However, for the future of the Nether Realm, it seemed there was hope. And that was more than enough to make me smile.

'Karlia... you've really become something else.' My thoughts echoed.

But, strangely enough, that only made me love her more.

"You're amazing!" I jumped into her arms instantly, finding the both of us collapsing under my weight.

"Hahaha! Took you long enough to realize that." She giggled as I embraced her and she did the same.

Before I knew it, we started kissing and laughing together.

It was an enjoyable moment, and it felt like an entire universal load of weight had been taken off my shoulders.

However, as we enjoyed our awesome time together and indulged in all the fun we could, something suddenly appeared in my mind.

'H-hold on... can the Constellations see us when we're having se—??!'

[A Week Later]

"So, what now, Lewis?"

Karlia and I were currently floating in the air, above the landscape where our newfound friends and acquaintances lived, and she looked me deep in the eyes when she asked the question.

"We've had a lot of fun, and you've shown me around this place, but I can tell there's still something else you need to do. Something on your mind." She added.

She wasn't wrong.

I had shown her the Goblin Village, and took her to what remained of the Labyrinths I experienced to get the Arcanas. And of course, through all of this, we had a lot of fun.

There were still many places we were yet to visit, and a lot more to explore, but besides that, there was something else on my mind.

And it seemed Karlia could tell. No, it was probably more accurate to say she could always tell, but didn't want to say anything.

At least, until now.

"There's one last thing I have to do. It's what Jared entrusted to me."

Karlia narrowed her gaze and nodded at me. She was waiting for me to tell her more.

"It's about Legris Damien. You know him, right?"

"Not really. We were both members of the Nether Cult, but I never really liked the guy. Something about him made me feel uneasy."

"Yeah... Jared felt the same. But, the more time I spent here, the more I was able to understand him more. I don't know why, but the more I know about him, the more uneasy I feel. Still, there's no going around the fact that we can't allow him to have his way." I explained.

Right now, Legris was at a point where he didn't exist in the Nether Realm, but also wasn't a denizen of the Aether Realm.

He was a completely different being, something different from anything me or anyone else.

"Who is he exactly? What's going on, and how do we stop him?" Karlia's words were very straightforward, as I would expect.

Inasmuch as she didn't prefer violence, she was the kind of person who was resolved to do anything if it would ensure her goals being achieved.

... Even if it meant committing atrocities.

"Hopefully we don't have to do anything. Jared and everyone else are doing their best to stop him. But, just in case he fails, we should do our best on this end as well."

That was the deal I made with Jared. I just hoped things wouldn't get to such a point where it was going to be the last line of defense.

"What exactly is our part to play in all this, though? What aren't you telling me? Karlia asked me, her brows narrowing.

Before I knew it, a gentle exhalation escaped my lips and I found myself staring down to the world beneath us.

A second later, my gaze returned to Karlia, and a tone of resolve escaped my lips.

"Ready for another field trip?"

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Chapter 1124: Farewell To Home

Farewells are usually accompanied by one of two things.

One of them is joy—the cheerful sounds of celebration, and the hopeful gazes of those that bid goodbye to you.

The other is sadness—when the eyes of the crowd carry such heaviness that it brings a certain bleakness to look into their eyes.

Sometimes, it was an odd mix of both.

Thankfully, our goodbye to this place was more of the former, and almost nothing like the latter.

Fairy King Oberon, Aria, Drake, Larry, and everyone else we had managed to befriend in the known world were here to witness our farewell.

Their cheerful gazes met ours as we stood at the precipice of our next voyage; though we could leave from anywhere at any time, we chose the very battlefield that would have caused a memory of despair if not for our interference.

Moments earlier, we had said our farewells to the Goblins, but now it was time to bid everyone here goodbye.

The party we had was amazing, and everyone had enjoyed themselves to the utmost.

But now, that was all over.

It had become a time of solemn farewell.

"Will you be coming back?" The question that hung in the air was finally asked by Oberon, who looked me in the eye as he spoke.

I looked at everyone who was present, their gazes implying the same question.

Would we be coming back? That... was an unnecessary question.

"Of course." I responded with a smile.

I had so many more things to look forward to in this place. I had fought for this world, and I had grown so attached to this place in the short span of my time here.

'The people here have become family to me. I don't think there's much of that waiting for me back in the Aether Realm.'

In more ways than one, this was my new home.

'And everyone needs to come back home at some point.'

I glanced to my right and saw Karlia's smiling face. To my left was the Ursula, who would also be serving as my companion on this new journey.

Everything was set.

"I guess I'll see you all later." The smile on everyone's faces infected me, and I could also see the surrounding Mecha Knights waving at me.

I, of course, waved back at them.

"It's time... [The World]." Once the pleasantries were concluded, I utilized the combined might of the Arcanas to generate a shimmering portal.

The swirling singularity stood behind me, Karlia and the Ursula. It warped space, and bended the laws that existed around us.

The sooner we left, the better.

"Take care until then." I said my final farewell, finally turning my back and facing the gateway that would lead to the final challenge I had to face.

"WE'LL BE WAITING FOR YOU!" The resounding chorus of the people behind me warmed my heart, and the intertwining fingers of Karlia as we locked hands together brought me comfort.

This was going to be the most dangerous task I had ever undertaken, and it made me worry endlessly about how much I had to lose.

However, I was fully aware of the potential loss that would occur if I did nothing.

The love I had for my friends, my family, my creations... and my dear wife-to-be, propelled me forward.

I could not fail.

"The optimal time is here. We should venture forward." The Ursula's voice echoed in my ears, and I nodded in response.

She was right.

"You ready, Lewis?" Karlia's soft voice made me stare at her longingly.

And I suppose that was the final push I needed.

"I am."

With those final words uttered, we stepped into the abyss... and never turned back.

[LOCATION: The Aether Branch]

<TIME PERIOD: Over A Month Before The Lewis' Departure>

~VWUUUUSSSSHHH!~

The world came into view as the swirling mass of contorted space parted to grant my allies and I entry.

"Haa..." A brief, but deep sigh escaped my lips as I finally breathed in the fresh air of the world around me.

It had taken a lot of time and effort, but we were finally back here in our original world.

"... It's good to... be back... home...?" I slowed down my speech almost as soon as I started it.

Moving closer to me from behind were Kuzon, Aloe, Edward, and Ciara—all of us who had just returned from traveling the worlds within the Aether Tree in order to return to our world.

However, upon arriving, we were instantly greeted by... strangeness.

"Is it just me, or is something wrong here?" Ciara was the first to break the silence as she looked as perplexed as the rest of us.

In response to her words, I said nothing.

It was still taking me a while to fully comprehend and process all that was happening around and within me.

Objectively speaking, there was nothing wrong with the landscape.

It looked the same, just like memory.

It was Ainzlark Academy, after all, where Neron's wedding had been held. We had returned to the last place we occupied before we were suddenly transported.

Yet... we could instantly tell something was off.

"It's not just here, Jared. It's everywhere. You can sense it too, can't you?" Kuzon drew closer to me, his tone carrying as heavy a weight as one would expect.

Kuzon had been the one most anxious to return, and now that we were here, I could sense the unease he was experiencing.

It nearly rivaled mine.

For one final time, I closed my eyes and probed the entire world... searching for anything, anyone that could explain what was happening.

But, ultimately found no one.

'Nothing again, huh?' I asked myself.

With widened eyes, I turned towards my friends, asking them a question I already knew they had no answers to. "Where...?"

That's right. None of us knew the answers.

"Where in the world is everyone?"

At least, not yet.

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Chapter 1125: The Towering Threat

[Moments Earlier]

The skies were darkened.

The earth was melting, dissolving into murky dark liquid that seemed like an endless swamp of boiling tar.

The pungent odor in the air was so toxic that a single whiff could kill anyone, and the the intensity of negative energy was enough to melt anyone to the marrow of their bones.

In essence, this was hell.

And in this hell, there was something magnificent—no, perhaps the word would be jawbreaking—was occurring.

"ROOOOOOOOOOOAAAAAAAAAAAAAARRRRRRRRRRRRRR!!!"

A colossal beast, only about the size of the tallest mountain one could imagine, echoed its enraged voice, sending it flying through the disgustingly dark area.

Its power sent shockwaves and bursts of energy filling everything around it, and the melting world around it shivered in response to its roar.

It was a bipedal monster, with four separate fore limbs dedicated to unbridled destruction. It had what appeared to be the mane of a lion, but also several tentacle-thingies behind it, swirling and whirring like hideous snakes ready to strike their prey.

That wasn't all, though. No... not even close.

This monster had spikes that oozed with poisonous fluids all over his body. They seemed like bones that poked out of its gleaming dark flesh.

Its nine glowing crimson eyes saw all, and its jaws loosened to display its salivating mouth, filled to the brim with spiky teeth that threatened to rip everything around it to shreds. Its humongous tail lashed around, like a whip that would tear all assunder with one strike.

With a monster taller than a thousand meters roaring in fury, there was no one in their right mind who would dare to stand against it.

None would even be able to come close.

However... this was when the miracle occurred.

~BOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOMMMMMMMMMMMMMMMMMMMM!!!~

This eruption was caused not by the roaring beast, nor any of its multiple destructive appendages, but by someone else.

No... not someone.

Three people in particular.

~WHOOOOOOOOOSSSSSHHHH!!!~

These three women had crimson, yellow, and white hair respectively. The yellow blonde had short hair, while the other two had long hair. Compared to the other two, she appeared very little—like a child.

Still, these three stood side by side.

With a wild grin plastered on the face of the crimson-haired woman, the stoic expression of the woman with white hair, and a calculating frown from the yellow blonde, the mist cleared, and their foe came into view.

It was the towering creature of unimaginable power.

"Looks like it devoured the others in this vicinity." The yellow blonde whispered, her hand pressing something like an earpiece locked in her ears.

Goggles instantly covered her pretty blue eyes, allowing her to properly perceive the monster.

"Its negative energy level is at a breakneck rate, and its still rising. If we don't deal with it now, it'll be a hassle later." She added.

"What does that mean, Ana? Can we take it or not?" The white-haired girl asked, her eyes unblinking as she stared emotionlessly at both the adversary and her comrade.

"It goes without saying, Maria. I just wanted to analyze it a little." The one called Ana, a Loli who was dressed in a white labcoat and a black and gold military-themed uniform, smiled at her comrade.

For Maria, she was dressed in a short-sleeved white robe, which fluttered with the toxic wind around them. Her inner wear was a black zipped up long-sleeved shirt that peeked out of the robe.

She, just like Ana, also donned trousers, as well as high-heeled boots, to complete her outfit.

"You girls... what's the point in wasting time like this?" The final woman, a crimson-haired lady, grinned widely as she took a step forward.

Her outfit was a mix of black, red, and white—a short sleeved crop top that hugged her body tightly, displaying her massive boobs and her streamlined body.

Her long hair flowed behind her, and her eyes kept glowing like undying embers of flames. And as her grin broadened, her fists clenched harder.

"We just have to kill it, right? Then let's go."

Both women looked at each other, and then the oldest among them—the crimson lady—and eventually had to agree about the futility of their conversation.

Their mission involved investigation, but fighting wasn't restricted as well.

When confronted with threats like this, there was only one reasonable option that came to mind.

"Annihilate it until there's nothing left."

The two women stepped forward, their gazes fixed on the monster while they parted their lips.

"Yes, Miss Serah."

"Understod, Master Serah."

Serah Crimson slapped her fist into her palm and gave the most fearless smile imaginable as her two comrades stood side by side with her—their focus on the creature who seemed like it was contemplating what to do with them, just as they were contemplating what to do with it.

But just as they all decided to eradicate it, the monster also came to the same conclusion.

"ROOOOAAAAA—"

~WHOOOOSSSHHH!~

In an epic streak of blinding light, the three women swiftly left their position, gliding with the wind instead.

Red, blue, and yellow auras burst within the darkness, like various flashes of lightening, instantly rushing to their targets like uncontrollable meteors.

Before the monster could complete its roar, they had already closed their distance, ready to strike the creature.

"First of all, the polluted area is granting an advantage to the Nether Beast. If I cut off its supply of Nether, it won't be able to regenerate or restore its lost power." Ana's voice echoed through the tense moment, and she took to pressing a button on her wristwatch.

Instantly, her boots transformed into a surfboard, with which she glided through the darkness while using her goggles to navigate through the world around her.

She ascended to the sky far above her companions who were busy with the monster.

~FSHUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUU~

In nearly an instant, the darkened sky, boiling earth, and toxic air, suddenly shifted in trajectory.

Not only did all the aforementioned cease to exist, but they were reversed to form different phenomena that would send any beast like it into shock.

The air now became refreshingly breathable, almost to an absurd degree. The skies were brighter than ever, raining down showers of brilliance. The earth hardened in beauty, forming the purest crystal-like minerals.

Everything seemed like a utopia: the expected aftereffect of all that Nether suddenly transforming into Aether.

"R-ROOOOAAAARRRR...?!"

The advantage the creature just earlier alluded to had dissipated before it even realized it, and instead of the toxic environment it revealed in, it was a world of beautiful wonder that now filled its sight.

A world that it didn't belong to.

"It took you long enough, Ana!" Serah grinned. "I could have beaten it without that, but I just wanted you to show us the new trick you've been working on."

"It's not bad. I've never seen you use it on this scale." Maria commented as she watched Ana descend from her position in the air.

"Well, what can I say? I needed a bit more time to study the other elements present in the air. It only took a few more seconds than anticipated, so it's not enough to complain about."

Her wind surfboard whirred as she took her position with Maria and Serah, who now jointly watched the Nether Beast squirm in the new environment it found itself in.

"It won't die anytime soon. The stockpile of Nether it has should be enough to last it a couple more days. That is, if it doesn't adapt first and learn to produce more internal Nether than the surrounding Aether."

With no renewable supply strong enough to offset the Aether poisoning it would be experiencing, a Nether Beast was bound to die in this case.

But there had been cases of Nether Beasts evolving past that.

Ah, not just Nether Beasts.

"I suppose what we have to do hasn't changed, then. We should put it out of its misery." Maria murmured, her stoic gaze resting on the creature before her.

"That's right, ladies." Serah Crimson's fist glowed with fiery energy once more.

"Let's end this once and for all."

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Chapter 1126: The Three Women

The Nether Beast was desperate.

In all of its existence, it had never felt this way before. This... threatened.

Born from malevolence, it always had the instinctive drive to wreak havoc and commit atrocities. It dominated its peers and ruled those weaker.

It consumed everything and everyone around it until it reached this point of its existence.

Yet... these three women who presented themselves before him... were causing him to feel such a rush of emotions that his bones shivered.

If it had hair on its disgusting black skin, they would all be rising in response to the current state of its mind.

No. It couldn't afford to be distracted by such nonsense!

In the end, this was three against one. The only reason they intentionally created such odds was because they knew they couldn't handle it alone.

Yes... that's right.

They were scared of it, weren't they? They knew they were weaker than it, right? That was why they were employing such brazen tactics instead of simply attacking head-on.

The creature snarled as it chuckled a little, glaring hatefully at the three women who seemed to be concluding their discourse and settling their eyes on it.

It wasn't afraid of them.

Not anymore.

They were prey to it. It would simply consume them and survive the current Aether poisoning by quickly adapting to the qualities of Aether by integrating their prowess with its own.

Yes... that was exactly right.

That was all it had to do.

No more holding back!

"ROOOOOOOAAAAAAAAARRRRRRRRR!!!!!"

The Nether Beast let out a screech, imbuing it with enough Nether to push back the Aether that fervently tried to eat at it. With this, not only would its opponents be weakened, but it would also get rid of the annoying debuff existing around it.

Also, while it could certainly heal its two severed limbs, that would take too much Nether, and right now it had to focus on surviving its current state until it consumed the targets before him.

More Nether had to be expended on eradicating them!

"RAAAAHHHHHHH!!!"

All nine of its crimson eyes glowed, and three of them flashed with elevated power.

~FWIIIISSSSHHHH!~

In a flash, a thin beam of concentrated power erupted from its three eyes and charged in the direction of its target.

The Nether Beast chuckled as it watched the beams near the targets.

It wasn't a simple energy blast, but a highly concentrated version of both poison and corruption. A single scratch would send Nether coursing through a person which would forcefully integrate itself into the poor soul until it perished completely.

All of this would happen within mere seconds.

There was also no point evading it since it would chase its targets no matter where they went. It had one-shotted many of its enemies with this power before, and this time it would be no exception.

It was now time... for them to DIE!

~FSHUUUUUUU!~

Before the beams reached them—just about five inches or so—they suddenly dissipated.

"E-EH....?"

What in the world was happening? It had no idea!

"What was that?" He heard one of them ask the other. "A Nether Beam?"

The Nether Beast didn't understand their language, but it was too stunned to stop listening. Even though it couldn't comprehend what they were saying, it kept watching them speak.

"It's more complicated than that, but with the Aether defense mechanism I put in place around me, which in turn permeates to all three of us due to our proximity, the Nether's quality broke down before reaching us. I would say this attack was rather concentrated considering it took a while before it was neutralized."

The yellow blonde was the one doing the explaining. It seemed she perfectly understood what was going on here.

"So, what would have happened if the Nether reached us?" This time it was the white-haired girl who spoke.

"Probably nothing. Your defenses should be enough to resist it. I'm not as strong as you two, so I have to rely on defense mechanisms like this." The blonde responded once more.

Something told the Nether Beast she was the most dangerous one of the bunch.

Wasn't she also the one who undid his Nether Territory? Yes, she had to be the main enemy here...

~WHOOOOOOOSSSHHHH!!!~

It was overcome by a far more powerful crimson energy that roared and swallowed the darkness whole—without any mercy.

The darkness evaporated, leaving the three women standing before it unharmed.

"AH..."

The Nether Beast didn't know what to say or do at this point.

It had attacked physically, and even used up a great deal of Nether, yet it couldn't even get one of these three women.

Not even its BOOM BOOM ATTACK worked!

Why? It wasn't fair.

It was meant to win!

Who...

Who were these people? Who in the world were they?

The Nether Beast cried in disbelief as it stared at the trio before it. Even though it couldn't understand any word they uttered, it could tell based on their expressions alone.

It was now their turn to strike.

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Chapter 1127: Beating Up A Dead Horse

"Okay, so to keep things fair, we'll all be allowed to have one strike each," Serah said, her arms folded as the last embers of her crimson strike danced in the air.

"Nothing more, nothing less."

Currently, all three women were discussing something super important. It was their strategy—if it could even be called that—for attacking.

In order to make all things 'fair', Serah proposed that they all give the monster one hit respectively until it perished.

"Haa... count me out of it. Just ensure there's a sample left for me to study later. This one piques my interest a little." Ana sighed, basically backing out of the agreement.

As such, only Serah and Maria were left.

"Well, what do you say?" Serah grinned at the girl.

Maria didn't know how to respond to this question. Serah Crimson was her master, both in Magic and also in Love.

She had taught her too many things for her to begin disregarding her words now. However, Maria also felt more inclined to sit this one out.

It wasn't because the monster was threatening or overly powerful. No, rather it was the opposite.

It was too weak.

'At this point, isn't like beating up a dead horse?' One of them would be enough to finish it off once and for all.

Ana had probably seen the futility of taking this fight seriously, so she backed down and settled for observing the creature more. Maria also preferred the more efficient approach, so she would have preferred it if just one person finished the creature off.

But... Serah Crimson was her respected master.

As such, there was only one answer to give.

"Understood, Master Serah!" Maria bobbed her head while keeping her face emotionless.

"That's the spirit. I'll go first!" Serah's grin widened even more as she clasped her hands together and cracked her fingers in what could only be interpreted as excitement.

"Don't worry, I'll hold back enough to let you have your go."

'No, it's okay if you just end it on your own. You can kill it in one hit. I don't mind.' These were the thoughts in Maria's head, but she dared not voice them out.

She could only nod her head one more time to play along.

"Let's do this!"

~WHOOOOOSSSHHH!~

In a brilliant spark of crimson light, Serah vanished from her position, completely escaping the sights of her allies and foe alike.

'Ah... there she is!' Maria finally spotted her behind the Nether Beast—at its base for that matter.

Serah was floating right behind its enormous legs, so the onlookers could only guess she was going after the Nether Beast's legs.

Strategically wise, that wasn't a bad plan.

'What should I do after?' Maria found herself wondering.

"ROOOOOAAAAARRRRR!!!"

The creature they faced seemed to have had enough of their bullshit because it sent several spikes launched at Serah, all massive projectiles converging on her position.

However, it was all pointless.

All the projectiles melted the moment they got into close proximity with her, and so the Nether Beast only had one other option left.

~SWISH!~

It swung its tail, whipping through the air as it approached Serah's tiny self.

"Hehe!" Rather than fearing for her life that the humongous thing lashing in her direction would do her in, Serah Crimson's excitement only seemed to rise.

She didn't try to strengthen her defense, or even counter with offense.

No. Instead, she stretched both hands out, as if expecting an embrace from the black and meaty whip that lunged at her.

And then...

~WHOOOSHHH!~

... She caught it.

The long and massive tail of the Nether Beast got stuck in her grasp, unable to budge an inch despite the hard struggle of the already terrified creature.

"My turn."

In a single huff, she effortlessly pulled the Nether Beast from its standing position, forcing to crash upon the earth, shattering the environs.

Debris scattered around like the ruptured innards of an exploded person, but this was only the beginning.

Serah Crimson tightened her grip so the tail wouldn't slip from her hand, and she began to spin.

~WHOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOSHSHHHHHH!!!~

A tornado inadvertently formed with her at the center, as she kept twisting and turning, sending the poor creature in her grasp flying around in a daze.

It was too helpless to stop the flow, and the current was certainly too strong for him to fight against. Most importantly, Serah's overwhelming energy rendered the creature immobile, to the point where it had become nothing more than a ragdoll.

"Up you go!" She smiled, thrusting the Nether Beast into the air in one glorious throw.

~WHUUUUSSSSHHHH!!!~

Like an inverted comet, the black creature charged into the sky without being able to control any part of the process.

Not even its own body!

"GUUUUUUUUUUAAAAARGGHHHH!!!"

It could feel the aftereffects of Serah Criimson's energy, and the damage it had done on its body and every portion of its defenses. At this point, it was a living corpse, a step away from death.

More and more Aether attacked it, and it didn't have long for the world anyway.

Perhaps Maria had noticed all of this when she saw the Nether Beast and gave a tired sigh. Her emotionless blue eyes were locked on the suspended Nether Beast, who had just reached terminal velocity, and would soon begin crashing down.

"It's your turn, Maria. Remember, one attack."

Maria nodded at her master, and then she contemplated what move to use.

Her specialty was Wind Magic, but she could also use Ice and Lightning Magic considerably well. Combined, she could utilize Blizzard Magic, which was more effective as an Area Of Effect type of Spell.

Maria felt that even that was wasted on this half-dead thing that was now having a free fall.

'If I overdo it, I might not be able to get the sample Ana wants.'

And so, after thinking and deciding for a while, Maria finally found the best alternative.

"[True Ice Magic: Blade Of Judgement]"

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Chapter 1128: Hollow Victory

"[True Ice Magic: Blade Of Judgement]"

No other word needed to be said.

Nothing had to be uttered, and not one more statement was needed to fully express the nature of what was to come.

From the very depths of the sky, something akin to a giant blade emerged.

It was pure white, with blue sigils glowing on the flat surface of the blade's surface. The blade glowed like pure metal, but it was simply made up of ice.

True Ice.

The descending blade sliced through the clouds and parted the sky's surface as it descended in a hum that caused a shattering vibration to permeate everything surrounding it.

The Nether Beast was over a thousand meters, making him a towering entity that would make humans—whose average were not even up to two meters—seem even lesser than ants.

Well, the Blade Of Judgement was nearly nine times as tall as the Nether Beast.

That is... it was 9,000 Meters tall.

~WHOOOOOSSSSHHHHH!~

Everything made way for its descent, and as its edge neared the pathetic creature that could only watch in horror as its end approached it, the Nether Beast could only silently accept its fate.

So it fell... and it pierced.

~SQUELCH!~

The single strike was enough to rip the entire creature's body into a million pieces before completely crushing its form.

Of course, Maria hadn't forgotten about her promise to Ana, so she ensured the Blade Of Judgement was gentle in its approach.

As such, after completely tearing the creature to shreds... everything about it froze.

"Haa..." Misty breath escaped Maria's lips as she closed her eyes and caused the still descending blade to vanish before crashing upon the earth.

She had never tried it before, but a blade of that size interacting with the earth like that, especially from its initial height, would prove cataclysmic.

But none of those irrelevant information mattered.

Their opponent was defeated.

"We won." Maria whispered, her face still exhibiting the same cold emotion she consistently showed throughout the fight.

After all, even if they had defeated such a powerful creature, it was a hollow victory.

It was always a hollow victory.

The aftermath of the fight was pretty simple. Ana was able to salvage the parts she wanted from the Nether Beast by sorting through its frozen gore.

She took a lot of its fluids and other parts she considered 'relevant' for her research.

Once she was done, Serah used her Magic to eviscerate the remains of the creature, completely removing any trace of its existence from the world.

"All in a day's work, I guess." Serah finally spoke to the crew, her smile spreading positively as her burning crimson eyes flashed brilliantly.

"We're done investigating the rest of this zone, then. I suppose that's fine." Ana muttered, sorting out the final piece of the Nether Beast into a special dimensional that appeared like a gaping black hole in front of her.

Once she was done fitting the last piece of her experimental piece into her vial and storing it in her special space, she looked about ready to go.

"Yeah." Maria simply muttered, and then, as if with an afterthought, she added. "Do you think we'll be any closer to finding them?"

The moment she said this, it felt like a hollow silence suddenly took over the entire space.

Ana and Serah's faces that once brimmed with optimism and excitement seemed to dull in almost an instant. Even Maria's expressionless face had a hint of sadness in it, not that she could tell.

"I... I am not sure. Based on the data and what we've gathered thus far, it's not wise to assume—"

"Well, there's only one way to find out, yeah?" Serah cut Ana off before she could conclude her words.

Her smile returned, and while it resembled the wide grin she had been displaying all this time, it was clear to those who watched her that the confidence she now displayed was to cover up the true nature of the situation.

No... perhaps her smile had always been for this purpose.

"Let's return to the base and ask Jane. She should be able to analyze the data and tell us." Serah finally concluded, and everyone else had no choice but to nod in response.

Another round of silence permeated the environment, and all three women stared at each other for a brief moment.

They had similar expressions on their faces, and it wasn't difficult to tell what it was.

However, before anyone could say or think anything else of the issue, the voice of Serah Crimson pierced the silence.

"Bring us back."

~VWUUUUUSSHHH!~

Just then, a swirling pool of energy washed upon them, instantly causing space itself to warp and all three of them to vanish from their position.

This was the Remote Warp function, and it allowed them to map out the immediate system around them and navigate through it.

As such, even if this wasn't their homeworld, it was a place they had arrived at using a Remote Warp. They had taken their due time to investigate this world for days—no, weeks—and the reward for all of that was an anticlimactic battle with a Nether Beast.

None of the people they sought were here, and neither were there any obvious clues on how to find them.

They could only hope that the one who developed this technology—Jane Ursula—could map out more of their immediate system since they could navigate more of the world around them the more worlds they visited.

This expedition would widen the scope of their expedition, and it could finally reveal a world where they could actually find the ones they lost.

... Or the one who made caused the loss.

As the Remote Warp brought Serah, Maria, and Ana back home, they silently contemplated what this all meant for them.

As well as how much longer they would have to continue this streak of despair.

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

Chapter 1129: Repressed Emotions

Within a plainly painted laboratory—colored all white and appearing congested due to the several apparatuses present within despite its very massive expanse—a Fairy stood behind a device.

She had peach pink colored hair, and her green eyes hidden behind lens were fixed on the button she pressed, as well as the massive generator that stood before her.

Jane Ursula, the Mad Witch as some knew her, was currently operating controls of the Remote Warp Device, or the RWD as she usually referred to it.

The device required intricate calculations, the right amount of energy output, and a proper wavelength analysis that proved difficult for anyone but her—its maker—to do.

Of course, she had assistance from tons of her Golems and Automatons, and they were all in their various stations, working on the various other parts of the machine.

Jane could have left this particular one to a highly competent Automaton as well, but she chose to handle it herself. Upon hearing her allies calling for her to ensure their return, she took full reign of the device, and after finally slamming a key in, a brilliant burst of light enveloped the room.

Like a swirling vortex invading the pure white room, a blast descended from the ceiling, and three silhouettes stood at the center of the energy storm.

Fortunately, the place they appeared in was a specially designed area meant to contain the spatial energy caused by such high-speed travel through worlds. As a result, the entire room remained safe from the torrents that manifested.

Jane's gaze left the machine and focused on the three entities within the dissipating storm. They were her comrades who had just returned from their latest expeditions.

"Serah, Maria, Ana... well done." Her voice was calm, and a smile formed on her face as she watched them step out of the containment area.

Ana and Maria had somewhat clouded expressions on their faces, but Serah still had her usual confident smile.

"Yeah. Good to be back home." Serah retorted, turning at the two younger women beside her. "Right, girls?"

Rather than giving a positive response that was similar to the vibe Serah was giving, what she got was the exact opposite.

"I guess..." Maria muttered.

"I'm more interested in your findings, Miss Jane. Is there any progress in the mapping? Have you detected anything?"

As expected, all of them were anxious about the results of their expedition. Other than fighting the Nether Beasts and purifying the target planet from any vestige of darkness, everything hinged on the results of the mapping.

No. One could say their search for their lost allies was the primary goal. Everything else came as a direct or indirect consequence of that.

"Relax, you three. The device is still analyzing the data. In the meantime, I'll need you to brief me on what happened." Jane tilted her glasses a little before speaking some more.

"Tell me everything.

One would think it was impossible to cram several weeks of expedition into a briefing of less than an hour, but considering how most of what the trio did this time was similar to the other previous times, it didn't take all day to highlight their experiences there.

They spoke of the landscape, ecosystem, energy concentration, encounters with creatures, and how they spent their time. With each of the three offering perspectives of their journey, as well as a combined account of certain elements, the briefing was soon concluded before the one-hour mark.

"I see... I understand." Jane muttered, sighing more in the process.

For a moment, there was silence among all four within the private chambers where they now occupied.

It was also painted pure white, and it existed right beside the lab, but it was probably better to discuss in a private chamber than in a congested workspace.

"Even if you discovered vestiges of Nether, you still didn't find any definitive trace of Ciel or Legris..."

The Nether Element had been introduced to the world when The Nether Cult nearly destroyed it. With The Nether invading their world, and Ciel's twisted plans nearly succeeding, everyone in the room knew just how dangerous that power was.

Legris Damien also seemed to have some connection to it, which made the process all the more connected.

"I thought by searching specifically for Nether, we would narrow the scope, but we're still not any closer to finding them."

The only good news was the nigh elimination of any trace of Nether within the observable world around them.

"You don't need to beat yourself up too much, Jane. After the wedding, you worked your butt off to locate any trace of Legris and Ciel. You did your best." Serah's voice echoed within the room.

"Well, that isn't enough. Results are all that matter." Jane's thoughts harshly leaked out, but she quickly realized how insensitive she seemed.

She could see Serah's smile falter a little, and that gave her the reflection she needed

"Sorry, Serah. Thanks for the encouragement..."

There was an unspoken knowledge in the room that no one brought up, and everyone decided it was best to simply hide within themselves.

Out of everyone here... the one suffering the most was most definitely Serah Crimson.

"Haha! It's fine. I can understand your frustration." The red-haired woman laughed it all off like it was nothing.

But, even if no one else knew, Jane understood full well that her smile wasn't real.

It was a mask.

'I'm sorry, Serah... I understand.' Jane thought to herself, hiding the compassion in her eyes as she tried to imagine the pain her friend was experiencing.

On the day that was meant to mark the happiest moment of her life, she had lost the most important person in her life.

Her husband.

The Wedding, a day of celebration meant to signify a happy moment where two people would be unified, ended up causing far more chaos and tragedy than anyone bargained for.

And the biggest victim was the bride herself.

'I know you're trying to be strong for everyone, but... Serah, you can't keep hiding your pain like this.'

Jane knew full well the dangers behind that.

Something had to give, and it wouldn't be long now before all her hidden emotions would be revealed.

Jane could only pray that Serah wouldn't break when it finally happened.

"You three are the first to return from your expeditions too. The others are still not done completing their assignments. I should say congratulations, I suppose." Jane decided to change the direction of the conversation considering how depressing the mood was getting.

As much as she thought it was better to talk about their feelings, she knew none of the women in the room were in the right space to discuss losing their loved ones.

"Well, they probably had more difficult missions..." Maria mumbled.

"Don't tell jokes, Maria. It doesn't suit you, hahaha!" Jane's unusually loud voice overshadowed Maria's best efforts at modesty.

"Oh. My bad."

The mix between the brightness of Jane's tone, and the dullness of Maria's response slowly built up to something.

This was it! The spark that led to what she wanted.

"Hahahaha!" Everyone in the mood burst into laughter, all at the stoic-faced girl's expense.

Yes, the laughter was a bit strained and forced.

Yes, it was probably not the best moment to be laughing.

However, for these women who had lost the ones they loved and cherished most... it was probably for the best.

At the very least, that was what Jane Ursula thought.

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

Chapter 1130: The Power Of Love

Once the ice was broken, all four women ended up having more fun than expected.

They discussed their time together, and some funny experiences they had.

Perhaps this was to distract them from the anxiety that came with waiting for Jane's device to finish processing the data, or simply a way to buy time.

Either way, they seemed to be having enough fun to make it all work.

"You know, Miss Jane, I could actually help out here. With this entire operation. I have some expertise in Magic Technology and Scholarship. I am also very adept at research. If we work together, I'm sure we could—"

"No."

Jane's flat response didn't surprise anyone.

This wasn't the first time Ana had raised the issue of working with, or even for Jane Ursula. Every time it happened, even if it was simply for the role of an apprentice, Jane would shoot down Ana's offer.

It felt like such a common occurrence, so no one paid it much mind now.

"But I can really—"

"I have said this before, but you are more useful in gathering field data. I can't leave such a task to any other person but you and a few others. Compared to them, you're the most brilliant too. Plus, I have enough manpower here, so there's really no need for more hands on deck."

"..."

Ana definitely had responses to counter Jane's point. An example would be to utilize an Automaton in her place in order to accurately gather field data, or how having two intelligent minds in the lab would even cause more innovative development than simple manpower.

But Jane would simply find another reason to counter her point, so Ana decided to give it up.

Why had she even brought it up in the first place?

"Well, I guess that's enough small talk. You ladies can show yourselves out. I need to do more tests and analysis." Jane rose to her feet, or one could say she flew from her seated position.

Her pink wings fluttered behind her as her lab coat swayed with the wind, and while she was much smaller than the rest of them in height, none could deny her presence.

Once Jane rose, the rest followed suit.

"I'll inform you three when the data has been completely analyzed. Though, I think it'll probably be best to wait for everyone's return so we can hold a general briefing and discuss what I find, as well as the plan going forward."

Serah, Maria, and Ana could only nod.

Of everyone on the team, Jane was the oldest and most integral in their search for the missing ones.

They all knew when to leave it to her, and so they filed out of Jane's room in an orderly fashion, with her floating right behind them.

Even though her gaze seemed distracted for a second, a smile remained on her face.

Same old Jane Ursula.

"Am I the only one who thinks Miss Jane is hiding something?"

As the three women walked side by side, taking in the wonderful sight of the lush fields that existed just outside the Fairy Capital, Ana's lips were moving, and her eyes flickered with something more than mere doubt.

It was full-blown suspicion.

"What do you mean, Ana?" Serah sighed, clearly tired, but still trying her best to hear the younger woman out.

Maria didn't seem to care, but she listened in anyway.

"I feel like she acts suspicious at times. Like, one moment she seems to have all the time in the world, and suddenly she has to go do something. She seems distracted at other times too. The most inopportune moments."

"Well, isn't it natural that her line of work would involve some unexpected issues arising? She's literally handling very complicated technology that needs constant monitoring and attention." Serah once again took Jane's side.

"But she has Automaton for that. Also, from what I have observed, the RWD doesn't need manual supervision. It only requires specialized expertise when activating certain functions, and even that can be efficiently addressed by specifically creating a system that functions with the algorithm to map out the frequencies of—"

"Ana..." Serah's tone cut her off, and it was clear that the younger woman was nerding out again.

This was why no one could take her seriously. Well, other than her child-like physique.

"A-ah, sorry. What I mean is that it is not as hard as she makes it seem. I think she's doing something behind our backs. I have no proof, but from what I'm seeing, it all just seems a bit suspicious is all."

For a moment, all the women fell silent. Perhaps after noticing the consistent seriousness of Ana's tone, they decided to take her words more seriously.

"You did have your suspicions about J-Jared being Lewis back then. You might be up to something..." Maria mumbled, her lips quivering at some point in forming the sentence.

The two other women noticed her hesitation, but chose to ignore it. Maria would do the same for them, after all.

"You also think so, Maria?" Serah glanced at the lull face of Maria, and saw her nodding slightly.

"Haa... you girls. Okay, fine. Maybe we'll confront her about it later."

"Why don't we just sneak around to uncover the secret? It'll be more fun than wa—ouch... what was that for?"

Ana's hand was on her head as small bubbles of tears formed on the corners of both her eyes.

The knock Serah gave was more than enough to make even a grown man bawl, but Ana prided herself on her ability to hold tears in.

She wasn't going to break her no-cry streak now.

"Let's not be mischievous. We'll ask her straight on. If she proves difficult, we might get sneaky later... but only as the last option."

"But by then she'll realize we suspect her and might improve the security." The most unexpected rebuttal to Serah's point came from Maria herself.

"Ah-ha! See? Even Maria thinks my plan is better!" Ana grinned victoriously, but quickly slid back so she wouldn't be hit by Serah once more.

... Not that she could avoid a knock from the woman even if she tried.

"You really want to go with Ana's plan? Really, Maria?" Serah's tone and face displayed just how shocked she was at Maria's response.

"I'm... just saying," Maria added.

Apparently, she wasn't taking sides. Just telling everyone the obvious.

"I think we should be as honest as possible with each other. Asking Jane about it would be better." The stoic girl finally concluded.

Hence, the ultimate victor was Serah.

"Tch. Fine... let's do it your way. Even if I was the one who brought this whole thing up..." Ana grumbled as they kept walking.

She had to admit that a direct confrontation would work best when considering how close they had become to Jane, and how they were all a team. However, even if they decided to sneak around to find out the truth, Ana didn't see anything wrong with it.

'She's the one that started sneaking around to hide her secrets first...'

But Ana quickly cautioned herself. Perhaps she was being too forward and feeling entitled to Jane's secrets.

Everyone had things they hid, and perhaps for good reasons.

'If only I had been this considerate towards Jared back then...'

After all, she had been very impulsive back then, and even though she was much older now, she still found herself with some of her old habits.

'People keep things for a reason...'

Serah had her reasons for hiding her grief with a smile. Maria had her reasons for never mentioning Jared or showing much of an interest in anything.

And she... she had her reasons for not crying despite how much she felt like it.

Perhaps Jane had her reasons for hiding her secret—whatever it was.

"Yeah. You're right." Ana smiled, finally sighing at herself. "Let's ask her nicely."

"Precisely! Seems you understand now!" Serah smiled, nodding vigorously.

"Umu." Maria also bobbed her head gently.

All three of them kept walking freely, and before long... silence took over.

What more could they talk about?

"Do you... think she'll find something this time?" Maria finally broke the silence with one of her blunt questions.

Whether the rest of them would admit it or not, the three women were all thinking the same thing.

Would this be the time? Would they finally get the information they desired?

"When everyone returns, and we have the meeting... we'll find out. Till then, I guess it's fingers crossed."

Ana's response was the most authentic anyone could give.

Serah nodded in response to it, and so did Maria. The three women looked at each other for a moment, and their darkened faces slowly formed smiles.

"It's been a while since it happened, hasn't it? I hope this time for sure... we find them." Maria was speaking a lot, which was uncharacteristic of her.

But Ana and Serah could understand.

"Yeah."

"That would be nice."

Even after so long, they hadn't lost hope that they would once again reunite with their lovers.

Because, despite it being ten years since the Wedding, they hadn't lost hope.

They still held on.

"We'll find them... no matter what."

That was the only reason why they could smile... even in the face of darkness or despair.

Perhaps it took a special kind of power to overcome grief and sorrow, and continue living despite the constant gnawing pangs of loneliness and fear.

That power wasn't Magic.

It was love.

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