

SPELLCRAFT 1151

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

Chapter 1151: Lovers' Squabble

In all honesty, it was difficult for Kuzon to believe that ten years had passed since he was separated from Ana.

However, after considering two major factors, he had no choice.

The first was the fact that Ana was so adamant about it, and she wasn't one to lie. She also didn't seem to be teasing him, so that really meant she was currently 26 years old.

As for the second option...

"You've grown by one millimeter. I didn't notice it before, but now that I look closely... yeah, I see it."

In essence, her increased height supported that quite some time had passed since their last encounter.

The moment Kuzon realized this, he patted Ana's head and told her the truth.

"Don't worry, little one... I believe you."

He made sure to give his warmest smile as his hand massaged her soft blond hair. They had lost a lot of time, but if they could catch up, Kuzon didn't see any problems with their relationship.

'I really missed out a lot from your life. I want to know everythi—' His thoughts were suddenly cut short by searing pain.

"Ow, ow!"

Ana had grabbed his hand and was now biting it! Yes, she was biting the had he had just used to pat her.

"What are you doing? Ow... stop!" Kuzon cried out, a bit of tears in his eyes.

Even though he had treated her kindly, and he had been so understanding, why was she being so violent? Sure, he still found it cute, but...

"I'm 26 years old, Kuzon. I'm older than you, so show me some respect!" Ana hissed, finally letting go of Kuzon's hardly bruised hand.

She confidently placed both hands on her hips, grinning with self-satisfaction as she reveled in her age and superior maturity.

Now that things had become like this, she was no longer the little one.

"Pfft! What in the world are you talking about?" Kuzon's word, however, broke Ana out of her bubble of confidence.

"Do you know how long I spent with Crazy Neron? Haha... I'm way older than you!"

"Crazy Neron? Who...?"

"Doesn't matter. He's an old man who taught me a couple things. In any case, if we're to calculate age, I'm at least a thousand years old. HAHAAAAHA!"

Ana's countenance nearly shattered as she watched Kuzon laugh at her, his hands on his waist too. Compared to his much bigger, imposing pose, she seemed to be nothing more than a little child.

It was enough to make her sniff a little as her shoulders dropped slightly.

"Okay, okay. How about we make a truce to see each other as equals? Is that better?" Kuzon was still chuckling, but he lifted his hand for a fist bump, a wide smile playing on his face.

His offer seemed to do the trick for Ana, as she readily raised her hand to reach his.

The contrast between both their limbs, how one was much bigger and tougher than the other, made their fist bump appear all the more genuine.

They both stared at each other in silence for a while, and then broke into wide smiles.

Sure, their method of interaction was... odd, to say the least, but they understood each other. And in the end, wasn't that all that mattered?

"I'm surprised you've still not asked me about my adventures after I got teleported away. I could have sworn that curiosity would be eating you up on the inside." Kuzon finally broke the silence by going on a tangent.

"Well, I guess I've grown up." Ana grinned in response.

"Sure, you do..." Kuzon could only reply sarcastically as he found himself rolling his eyes.

"I'm serious! I don't want to know about your 'crazy' adventures, at least not yet. Let's enjoy this moment a little more."

As soon as Ana said that, she lunged at Kuzon, wrapping her arms around him to the point where her body squeezed on his.

Kuzon didn't mind this at all.

"I was thinking the same thing." He smiled, remembering how long he had waited... how many times he had dreamt of this very moment.

The chance to finally feel Ana's flat chest on him.

Kuzon closed his eyes and let the experience take full control of him, smiling in satisfaction as everything that had happened to him until now faded into obscurity.

Right now, only the two of them mattered.

"Hey... just so you know..." Ana's lips moved close to his ears and began to whisper words to him. "... After this is all over, you'll tell me every single detail of your adventures..."

It was probably just his imagination, but Kuzon felt a somewhat heavy atmosphere taking over.

"... Including the girl you spent so much time with, and why you reek of her aura."

"Eh?"

Kuzon's body suddenly grew rigid as his memories traveled back to his time in the Lost Worlds. He remembered just how much time he had spent with his female companion.

'She can sense Maya on me?!' Beads of sweat began to appear all over his face as he carefully pondered on his next words.

However, even after Maya, he had hung out with other girls in his other voyages. Whether it was the Hunters Association, or the Grand Federation Academy, or the Demons in Edward's Dimension.

The list grew more and more as Kuzon thought ore about it.

'But I did nothing wrong! I'm innocent!' This sole conviction stopped him from gulping hard or overreacting.

Perhaps he would have a stronger card if he could sense the aura of a guy on Ana, but the strongest sensation he got from her were auras of metal and minerals.

Kuzon felt a little worried about her social life.

In the end, Kuzon knew he had to speak up before his silence became suspicious. After carefully picking out his words, he finally spoke.

"Which girl are you referring to?"

Ana instantly furrowed her brow, and she made sure Kuzon saw her as she looked him straight in the eye.

"There's no use lying to me, you know?"

"Ah, I guess I need to rephrase my question..." Kuzon mumbled to himself, straining a smile as he looked straight into Ana's eyes.

"... Which 'particular' girl are you referring to?"

Upon hearing this, Ana's eyebrows began to twitch, and Kuzon's lips curled upwards. He seemed to be holding in laughter, most likely due to how funny Ana's scowl looked to him.

"I'll kill you..."

"No you won't."

"I'LL KILL YOUUUUU!"

~WHOOOSSSHH!~

Kuzon swiftly dislodged from Ana's embrace the moment she wanted to crush him, and sped off into the sky.

Ana shrouded herself in energy and instantly chased after Kuzon as her eyes were alit with passionate fury.

"Come back here, Kuzon!"

"Noooooo!"

"Explain yourself now!"

"Neveerrrr!"

They danced in the sky, playing a game of tag, with both sides knowing exactly what was at stake if they lost.

To be honest, Kuzon really had nothing to hide, and Ana also knew that on a fundamental level.

Still, they engaged in these childish squabbles.

All for one reason...

It was FUN.

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Chapter 1152: Call Of Duty [Pt 1]

'Looks like it's time to get serious.'

I was currently standing within the large meeting hall, facing the seated and standing members of the board. Kuzon, Aloe, Ciara, and Edward were behind me, and everyone else was looking at us from an audience perspective.

According to Aloe's short message to me, she had already briefed everyone on what happened to us—how we got separated to different worlds, how we found one another, and how we were able to return to this reality.

She had done all of this while the rest of us were too occupied to take on the role.

For that alone, I was most grateful.

'However, now it's time for me to take charge once again...' It seemed a little awkward since, biologically speaking, I was the youngest in the room.

Even Asa that was just a kid when I last saw him was now an adult, older than me by a few years.

However, despite the age gap and internal awkwardness I felt, I was still met with the respectful expression of my audience.

Perhaps, even to the most fundamental level, they knew that my age meant nothing.

It also helped that I was the leader of the Alliance.

As such, it was time for me to take on my mantle and speak to the eager ears awaiting my address.

"As you are all aware, our opponent is Legris Damien. He is the architect of our current situation, and also someone who needs to be stopped before he attains his goals." I began, my voice calm and steady.

"I have devised a plan to take him down for good. It's still uncertain where he currently is, but I have a good idea about what he wants, which will inevitably translate to his goals. If we can understand his desires, we should be able to predict his behaviour and destination, thus tracking him down."

For a moment, silence pervaded the hall. I could tell everyone was absorbing the contents of everything I had just said. The current plans we were making had the highest scale in terms of implication and danger.

"What exactly does Legris want?" Someone finally raised a question.

It was Beruel. His concerned eyes met mine, and I could tell that he was among those who felt this threat the most. As someone who had worked with Legris in the same Nether Cult, he must have felt something was off about Legris too.

Now that things had unraveled to this extent, Beruel—and pretty much the rest of us—could now feel the extent of his threat.

"I can only chalk it up to one thing: POWER."

Everything he had done thus far, all the calculations I had made, everything I spoke to Neron about, and the deliberations made internally... everything led me to that conclusion.

"I have no idea to what end he desires this power, but it can't be good."

Legris was a man who would do anything to achieve his goals. He was a nuisance for Neron, just as he was a nuisance to me. Extremely intelligent, crafty, and covert.

"That slimy bastard has to be stopped once and for all." I declared, and based on the expressions of my audience, they agreed with me.

"How do you plan on tracking him down, though? We have had no luck these ten years." Jane spoke this time, her tone cautious as it was intrigued.

She probably thought I had devised an exceptional means or Magic Technology to achieve that goal.

Well, she was wrong.

"I reckon Legris will target locations with high concentrations of power, and by mapping out irregular patterns, or areas where detection fails, we can narrow down the range a little." I would require Jane's assistance for this, or perhaps Ana.

I was sure they had detection devices, but now that we understood Legris' goals, we could specialize the equipment to function the way we desired.

Hence, a more effective means of targeting Legris.

"We shouldn't overlook Ciel. She was Legris. I never thought those two would team up..." Beruel spoke up once more, stroking his chin slightly.

Of course, I hadn't forgotten about Ciel.

"She most likely desires the return of the Nether. That's probably the reason she partnered up with Legris. That further proves my conclusion that Legris is after power." I responded to Beruel, and then proceeded to address everyone generally.

"The fact that the Nether hasn't been brought back yet means one of two things. Either Legris doesn't have enough power to bring the Nether back, or Ciel believes he doesn't yet possess enough power to do so."

The first possibility relied on Legris' current weakness, and how Neron had shaved off a considerable amount of his power, while the second relied on Legris' sly nature and how unpredictable he could be.

"I doubt the latter is plausible, all things considered, so I submit that the former is more likely."

Legris didn't have enough power to free the Nether. As long as that remained a factor, Ciel would accompany him and they would work together until he was able to bring that horrid entity into existence.

'The fact that he's willing to go that far means he doesn't care about what happens to existence. That means his goals are... argh, Legris, what could you be up to?'

The more I thought about it... about him... the more his goals seemed too absurd.

"In any case, he could be using Ciel for her abilities, and then dispose of her once her use has expired. We should also consider a possibility that he has enough power to bring the Nether into existence, just so we're not caught off guard."

Everyone nodded at my words, and I nodded back.

"As you are all aware, Neron swapped out our world with a similar one. This was done to protect us from Legris, which means Legris' last known location has to be the replica world that Neron swapped ours with."

Of course, there was no guarantee he would still be there since he had [The World].

Still, since that would be his last known location, it was a good idea to begin our search from that empty world and work our way around from there.

"As such, I will require an elite team to accompany me... so we can track Legris Damien and defeat him, once and for all."

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Chapter 1153: Call Of Duty [Pt 2]

"Not everyone in this room will be able to participate in this mission."

When considering the stakes involved, and the proportion of the threat we had to face, only the most capable could even be considered, talkless of selected.

Everyone who was present in the hall was capable, especially in their area of expertise. That was why they were here, in the first place.

However, we had to thin out our numbers.

'Thus, I require an elite team.'

"I guess I should count myself out, then." A voice from the audience suddenly rang out.

I had expected some level of hesitation and silence before I proceeded to select the ones I would need for the mission, so it surprised me when I heard someone throw in the towel very early on in the game.

Glancing in the direction of the voice's origin, I saw Elrich Lendertwale raising his hand as he gave a resigned smile.

"I know my limits. I might be a Grand Mage of the Eastern Kingdom, but I'm too weak for something of this scale." He sighed.

Elrich's honesty with himself, and the rest of us, made me leak out a smile in respect. That made one less person I had to consider among the audience before me.

'Now, what of the rest...'

As my thoughts trailed, I saw another hand raised, and it belonged to Dulum, the Dwarf Chief. He had an awkward air around himself, and his stout physique seemed to puff up due to the flushed expression he had on his face.

"I guess I'm out too. I'm not suited for this kind of stuff."

It seemed Elrich's actions had inspired someone else to make a choice and take themselves off the board. The way things were going, it wouldn't be surprising if more people removed themselves from the potential list.

'That'll mean less work for me, so let's see...' I nodded at Dulum, appreciating his decision as I stared at everyone else.

"Well, I'm not leaving the team. I recommend myself to join this elite force. I believe I'm strong enough!" The gruff voice of the Beast King echoed within the meeting hall.

I suppressed my sigh as I stared at Gerard, who was grinning widely.

'He seems fairly confident. He's definitely grown incomparably stronger than before...'

I noticed his gaze inconspicuously going in Serah's direction, and I instantly understood why he was so forward with his proposal.

'Is he trying to impress Serah? I guess he must think he has a shot now that Neron isn't around.' I suppressed my laughter and maintained a calm expression.

His desperation was hilarious, but I couldn't deny his strength. He would make a good addition to the team, but for now he was simply going to remain a potential candidate.

"I also wish to assist." Z'ark, the Dragon King, voiced out in his deep and aged tone.

The moment he did so, I noticed Gerard giving him a glare, and he returned it too. For some reason, it seemed they had an air of enmity between them.

'Did I miss something? When did this rivalry start?'

In any case, about Z'ark's potential as a member of the team, he was incredibly powerful too. His Original Magic had to do with mass, so it would certainly be useful.

'If I can use this chance to learn it too... it's not a bad idea.'

Still, just as with Gerard, I could only chalk him up as a potential candidate.

Asa and the other one of the Beast King's entourage threw in the towel, and so did the Dragon King's aides. That meant four more individuals in the room had forfeited being considered into the team.

'I wasn't going to accept any of them anyway. Asa has a lot of potential, but with Gerard already here, it's fine...'

His ability to blend in so seamlessly with the world, becoming as good as nonexistent, had intrigued me in the past, but I was now able to replicate it, so it wasn't as amazing as before. Plus, back then I didn't understand how Nether worked.

I knew about it now.

'He's still inexperienced, so it's best he sits this one out.'

My gaze rested on the remaining people in the room.

"I want to join in on this mission." Aurora Vindiel spoke up in a pristine tone, raising her hand gently.

She received no complaints from me. As the Elf Queen, she was more than capable of being a useful addition to the team.

"M-me too!" Lemi spoke up from behind her, and I could see determination etched in her eyes.

I smiled almost instantly.

'What's this, Lemi? Want to impress your old man with your growth?' I found that quite endearing.

From where I stood, I could see how much she had grown compared to the last time we interacted. I was sure she could now control her power better, and with her intelligence, I was sure she had figured out other methods in which to utilize her power.

I found myself most excited about her than the other entries, even though she was probably the weakest.

'I also want to see what you can do now, Lemi.'

"Count me in too!"

"Me as well."

Ana and Maria respectively echoed out their thought, and I had no problems with it. They were both powerful, plus there was no way I could possibly say no to them.

"I... I want to join as well!" The next person that spoke surprised even me.

I wasn't expecting Jerry to declare his intentions of joining despite the caliber of people I had expressly asked for.

He had a fiery passion in his eyes, one that desired to join above all else. I knew he understood his current level of strength, and how that disqualified him, yet... what was with this determination he was oozing out?

Regardless, I had to tell him the truth.

"Jerry, you—"

"You're too weak, Jerry!" Ciara's voice overlapped with mine, and before long, she overshadowed my words.

Her harsh words echoed across the hall, and I was once again reminded of how harsh Ciara could be.

"You should just stay behind."

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Chapter 1154: The Candidate Roster

Jerry appeared conflicted.

From his demeanor alone, I could tell that he felt immensely guilty for uttering his intentions to join us despite his obvious limitations.

Jerry wasn't a genius by any means, and while he was far more powerful than an average Mage, he was still leagues behind those with pure talent and skills to make the cut.

He wouldn't even make the list of potential candidates, and he was well aware of that fact.

Yet... why was he so adamant?

"I know I'm not as strong as the rest of you, but... I'm not weak by any means!" His gaze was directed at Ciara in particular, and I noticed her tremble slightly.

The fiery determination in his eyes also caught my interest, but that wasn't enough for me to consider him.

"Please... let me join. The moment I become a burden, you can send me back!" Jerry pleaded once more.

It had to have taken a lot of courage to speak up despite the hall being filled with people his senior— both in age and power.

'Well, since that's the case...' I was still skeptical about Jerry joining, but I couldn't ignore his confidence and determination.

I had to give him a chance too.

"Fine, Jerry. You'll be considered a potential candidate as well." I sighed, noticing how he smiled brightly the moment he heard those words.

I took a moment to check out Ciara's reaction, and it seemed she was still doubtful concerning Jerry's performance. I didn't know what those two had discussed while I was with Maria, but it didn't seem like they had fully settled the drama between each other.

'Well, I better stay out of it.' With that thought in mind, I glanced at Ivan and smiled.

"How about you? Want to take the same chance as Jerry?"

Ivan Smith was a tier lower than Jerry in terms of abilities, though they were very similar in many respects. Ivan was also someone who had tempered himself and his skills, but even then... people had their limits

I was curious about what decision he would make after seeing Jerry. Would he be inspired, or...?

"I'm going to sit this one out." He shrugged somewhat nonchalantly.

That surprised me a little, considering the kind of hotheaded person Ivan was, and how much he valued a good challenge.

"I want to be like Jerry and confidently assert my strength, but I know myself well enough. Rather than be a burden to everyone, I'd rather train more and better myself." Ivan concluded.

The strong expression in his eyes told me he meant every word. He wasn't scared for himself, or about facing an overwhelming foe.

No, he was more concerned about his allies.

His eyes told me one thing: "I'd rather die than burden my friends."

It was a respectable position to have, and I respected it. Nodding and smiling at Ivan, I took note of his withdrawal and concluded that the path he took was a brave one as well.

King Albion was already disqualified due to his weakness, and after sorting out the potential members of the team, I was left with a good number of names:

Kuzon, Edward, Aloe, Ciara, Serah, Maria, Ana, Aurora, Lemi, Jerry, Z'ark, Beruel, Gerard, and me.

I then turned my attention to the only one who was yet to make any statement about whether she would be joining or withdrawing—Jane.

"Won't you be joining us?" A small smile formed as I teasingly spoke those words.

Perhaps she was waiting for me to ask her, or—

"I'll have to decline." She didn't even skip a beat before responding, flexing her glasses as she spoke.

"Eh?"

"I have important work I'm doing here, so I'd rather focus on that. Plus, it seems you already have a pretty capable crew."

Something about Jane's tone felt distant, and while I couldn't quite place what it was... her response struck me as odd.

'She isn't the strongest among us, but Jane is incredibly powerful too. Especially her Soul Magic.'

Still, if she felt she wasn't up for the task, then that was fine.

'Or is it?' Jane would never give up an adventure due to simply being busy.

She wasn't called The Mad Witch for nothing. If she had an opportunity to explore more of the world and understand more about Magic, she would take her chances with such an adventure.

For her to pass off one such chance due to being occupied... it felt strange.

'Now isn't the time to think about that, Jared. Ten years have passed. I can't assume things like that. Plus, there are more important things to worry about.'

Not having Jane on our team wouldn't prove too detrimental, so I didn't have to push the issue.

"It looks like thirteen people are candidates. Adding me to the mix makes us fourteen."

If it wasn't obvious already, everyone who got sent away by Legris was automatically a member of the team. My rationale behind that was not only due to how much they had grown in their respective adventures, but also the potential they had against Legris.

'The fact that he teleported them first before the others... that shows that they're threats to him.'

It also helped that we had all grown stronger in our journey across the Aether Branches.

"It seems there's a final issue to address, which is the Hive that Jane has discovered using the data you have all actively collected over the years."

I didn't know the details, but Maria had briefed me about it a little, and I also communicated a little with Jane—telepathically, of course—to find out more.

According to the information they had, all the Nether in this world had converged to form a final stronghold of darkness.

Many would look at the Hive and think of it as a threat, but I simply saw it as an opportunity.

"What better way can you prove your worth for the mission than that?" My grin widened, almost to the point of looking sinister.

Our opponent was an entity that defied explanation. The bare minimum was for our team to be able to eliminate leftover scraps of Nether.

'It should make for a good test.'

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Chapter 1155: Celebration

[The Next Day]

Once the meeting was over the previous day, and everyone was meant to go their separate ways to prepare for the arduous journey ahead, there was one more thing that had to happen.

It was an inevitable event that had much significance to the present.

A Grand Party!

Throwing aside the severity of the threat hanging upon them, the reality of the world's heroes returning after ten years was too large to ignore.

It called for a massive celebration.

The celebration was so grand that everyone from all the nations gathered in the site where the tragedy had occurred in the first place—Ainzlark Academy.

Just as with Neron's wedding, the party welcomed a crowd of people, and the liveliness peaked beyond the Eastern Kingdom's borders.

The guests poured in, and the hosts were also enjoying themselves on this joyous occasion.

Friends and allies were able to meet up and see each other after so long. Members of different families were able to greet one another in good faith.

All in all, it was a bastion of happiness and excitement.

While a few had the reasonable apprehension of fear, considering what happened during the last big party that was thrown, that didn't stop them from having as much fun as they could.

Perhaps it was due to my assuring words, or the absence of the malefactor that struck the last time. Or perhaps... they no longer had a care in the world.

After ten years of dread and a desperate attempt to bring back their loved ones, perhaps the people simply wanted to revel in their victories and forget everything else.

And so they did.

Even though I could recognize a lot of faces in the party, I was too occupied with my fair share of issues, namely my parents and grandfather.

No, more like my entire family—aunts, uncles, and cousins too.

They absorbed all of my attention, and the worst part was... I didn't even know who most of them were!

So many others wanted to talk to me, but as someone whose family had not seen in ten whole years, I was hoarded by them—my mother, especially.

The only exception to this was, of course, meeting the Helmsworth Household.

I had kept them waiting for ten years, so I had to pay my respects to the Duke and Duchess, Maria's parents.

In all honesty, they were the same as before—stoic and calm.

I had already gotten used to their demeanor, so I was not on edge when we spoke. We exchanged pleasantries, and they reminded me that they were still waiting.

"I will not disappoint," Was all I could say in response, and my genuine smile should have been enough to tell them of my sincerity.

The party was a bit overwhelming for me, and it forced me to forget about the multiple worries that swept through my mind—albeit temporarily.

Despite all the hustle and bustle, though, I couldn't help but consider how everyone else was faring.

I certainly hoped they were having fun too.

After all, this... all of this... wasn't going to last for much longer.

"Why did you do it?"

The party had reached its climax, but despite the loud noises of the crowd, and the dancing pervading the entire expanse that occupied the celebration, two people currently stood side by side in near silence.

The atmosphere was a mix of awkwardness and tension, and if the girl among the two hadn't spoken up, they might have remained quiet for the entire duration of their time together.

"Why did I do what?" The auburn-haired boy turned to the brunette, his eyes glowing with sincerity.

His name was Jerry Keller, and the girl beside him was Ciara. They had been childhood friends for as long as he could remember, but the tension currently enveloping them was not reminiscent of friendship at all.

It felt distant... almost as if they were strangers.

"Don't play dumb! Why did you recommend yourself for the mission?" Ciara's voice finally peaked as she returned Jerry's sincere gaze with a tearful glare.

"Ah... is that why you're upset with me?"

"I'm not upset, you idiot! I'm worried! What if you get hurt during this mission? What if something worse happens to you?" She responded back, leaving no time to breathe.

Jerry couldn't have known this, but Ciara remembered how her doppelganger had lost her Jerry. That heartbreaking experience was something she didn't ever want for herself.

Yet, here Jerry was... throwing himself into the biggest danger they had ever faced.

"W-what if... something irreversible happens to you? I don't know what I'll do if I lose you!" Ciara's voice trembled as she released raw emotions, staring deep into Jerry's eyes.

Her lips quivered, and tears oozed down her eyes, trailing down her cheeks. She probably couldn't word her thoughts well, but these questions said it all.

She simply didn't want to lose Jerry—not after losing him once before.

"What if you get hurt?" Jerry's sudden voice interrupted her myriad of worrying thoughts, causing Ciara's eyes to widen at the question.

"W-what are you...?!"

"What if something irreversible happens to you?" Jerry moved closer as he asked his second question.

The awkwardness slowly began to dissipate, leaving only tension amid the two.

"Just as you worry about me, I worry about you too..." His words trailed, but his honest gaze remained fixed on the trembling Ciara.

"I-I can take care of myself! I'm strong enough! But you... you're—!"

Before Ciara could conclude her statement, Jerry drew closer to her and pulled her into an embrace with him, his larger build swallowing her small physique whole.

"I know I'm weak. I know you're strong. But... that doesn't stop this burning sensation in my heart." His whispers felt like the soothing winds, blowing away dandelions in the warmth of spring.

"This yearning within me won't vanish. These echoes in my heart won't dissipate. What should I do, Ciara?"

Hearing her name play out of his lips, and feeling his tenderness was enough to shatter the rest of Ciara's defenses.

"I just want to protect you."

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Chapter 1156: Saying The Words

Ciara could feel her heart racing as she rested her face in Jerry's chest.

His strong masculine scent increased her thumping heartbeat, and yet she also felt a form of safety in his embrace.

She felt shrouded by something strong and firm. Despite Jerry being far weaker than she was, and despite all the loss he had suffered in her presence, she had never felt so safe.

And hearing him utter those words...

"I just want to protect you."

... Ciara felt her cheeks burn up, and her lips unconsciously formed a soft smile.

Why did she like hearing him say such things to her?

Why did her body instantly turn to jelly the moment those words graced her ears?

How could someone weaker than her even muster the courage to utter such a statement?

And finally... how could she feel so much from those simple words?

These mysteries were encapsulated in three words, and Ciara knew them. She had known them for so long, but somehow she had been unable to voice them out.

... At least, until now.

"J-Jerry, I—"

"I love you, Ciara." Jerry's words cut her off before she could conclude her confession.

His calm, confident tone caused Ciara's entire body to shudder as his words played over and over in her head.

"W-what..?"

She felt like she was going to turn insane due to how overwhelming it was for her to hear something she had waited her whole life to witness.

"I said I love you, Ciara." Jerry's words came once again, and she slowly felt him pull away from her.

'No... not yet!'

She didn't want him to stop hugging her.

She didn't want to stop resting on his broad chest.

She certainly didn't want to stop listening to the melody of his racing heartbeat.

However, Ciara was too weak to resist his pull and push. She could only flow wherever her heart went, and right now... Jerry held it in his palm.

With their bodies now apart, Jerry's handsome face now became evident to Ciara, and so did the genuineness of his confession. His soft smile, his pretty eyes... everything about him added so much intensity to his confession that Ciara felt her heart might explode.

Looking at his face after hearing how he felt about her made her feel like she would collapse under the weight of her own feelings.

They devoured her from the inside... until she had no choice but to open her lips and set them free.

Those three words she had kept for years...

"I-I love you, Jerry! I love you too!"

Her heart felt liberated the moment she released her inner outcry. Her tears dried almost instantly, and her glossy lips slowly formed a smile.

She stared into his eyes, and he stared back. She could see hints of surprise on his face, most likely due to her confession, but none of that mattered now.

The most important thing was that she had said it! She finally did it!

'What now? What will happen now? What will you do now?!' Ciara didn't know, and that brought her both excitement and fear.

The ball was in Jerry's court, and her heart raced, waiting for him to do something... ANYTHING!

... And he did.

Swiftly moving his face, letting the wind carry his hair backward, Jerry sent his lips crashing on Ciara's. Her lips were already waiting for him, and as they locked onto each other, the two held onto each other's faces and kissed passionately.

The climax of their time together.

What had started out as an awkward, tense moment had now escalated into one of pure passion and love.

Jerry's hands rested on Ciara's, encapsulating them into his as he kissed her even deeper than before.

The connection they had established was transcendental.

It felt beyond the bounds of anything that existed... birthing something inexplicably powerful.

Something no one could know.

Not yet.

And then, once they finally ceased their kiss and looked each other in the eye, they were already tightly holding each other's hands.

"After living ten years without you, I realized it... how much you mean to me, Ciara..."

It wasn't up to ten years for her, but Ciara definitely couldn't live without him either.

Hearing that he felt the same brought an infinite amount of joy to Ciara—one that could not be defined.

"I... don't ever want to let you go." Their faces drew closer once more, like magnets unable to resist each other.

The noise and music of the party in the backdrop became nothing more than a blur. The universe... all of existence seemed to vanish.

Only these two existed in each other's eyes.

"Me too, Jerry." Ciara finally spoke up, and they resumed their kiss, completely consumed in their love.

Their undying love.

'Me too...'

Two people were currently walking side by side, their faces filled with smiles and occasional laughs as they conversed.

The party was a short distance behind them, but they seemed to be increasing that distance with their current walk.

On one side was Aloe Vida, and on the other was Maro Smith.

Nothing akin to awkwardness seemed to be present in their discourse, and their faces clearly depicted enjoyment. They were certainly having fun.

However...

"I can't believe that happened. Haha! A lot really occurred during those ten years, huh?" Aloe laughed hard as she looked at Maro's chuckling face.

"Yeah... a lot happened." His voice trailed a little, but he still had some chuckles left before finally falling silent.

After those words, none of the two spoke for about a minute.

They also stopped walking.

Instead, they gazed up at the sky, watching its magnificent beauty with smiles etched on their faces. It was a solemn sight, one that encapsulated both beauty and melancholy.

"Indeed. You even got married... and you have kids now too." Aloe's lips formed a smile as the stars were reflected in her eyes.

"So much has changed."

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Chapter 1157: Growing Up And Apart

Aloe and Maro had always had something of an odd relationship.

It started off as simply being allies, fighting for the same cause. However, after they were paired together, they slowly began to realize their chemistry together.

However, none of them acted on it—not really.

Perhaps if they had been given enough time, something more could have blossomed from their relationship.

However, after the wedding, everything began to fall out of place.

The chemistry they felt was unable to mature any further.

In her voyage within the Aether Branches, Aloe was able to discover more about herself and what she wanted, and within those ten years, Maro got married and had two children.

Their separation forever altered their paths, dissipating the embers of chemistry they had experienced.

"It wasn't all bad, though. I had a wonderful time with you." Aloe smiled, making a light shrug as she turned to Maro for one final glance.

"Yeah. I had fun too."

These two never properly kissed, or went on a date, or anything of the sort. Perhaps it was a good thing they never explored their feelings any further.

"To be honest, I don't feel like getting into any relationship currently..." Aloe leaked out her thoughts as she stared at the night sky above her.

"Oh? Any reason why?"

"I'm not sure. I suppose I'm young and I have a lot of other things I want to explore. I'd like to focus on that for now." Aloe responded, her mind a distant blur.

"I see. Well, it's probably for the best. Take it from a happily married man, taking care of kids can be a hassle sometimes."

"Pfft! You don't say..."

"For real! They're so troublesome! More troublesome than anything I've ever ventured into. And they're fragile too... ahh, such a hassle, I tell you."

Aloe's smile widened as she heard those words.

"But...?" She added, raising her brows.

"But they're amazing nonetheless. It's amazing how much they've grown already... and how much happiness and fulfillment they give me."

"Yeah... maybe I'll have a family one day. Maybe not." Aloe shrugged. "I just want to focus on myself for now, I guess."

Maro could only nod in response to her words.

"That's valid too."

Once more, silence reigned among the two.

They simply sat and enjoyed the night view as friends—nothing more, nothing less.

"Haa..."

Aloe Vida was currently alone, staring at the night skies alone.

Maro had run off a while back after getting a message from his wife about his kids. He had to help her with them, so he left.

Aloe didn't feel particularly bad about being by herself. She even felt worse for Maro, having so much responsibility on his shoulders.

At the moment, all she wanted was to be as free as she could be.

Perhaps she would get her wish eventually.

"Miss Aloe!" A sudden voice echoed from the distance, instantly catching Aloe's attention.

Her eyes popped wide open, and so she ceased her lying position, sitting upright to look in the direction of the voice calling out for her.

"A-ah, you..." Aloe's eyes widened as she recognized the young man running in her direction.

"... Asa?"

That's right! Nearing her position was the Beastfolk she last knew as a child, who had now become an adult physically on par with—if not superior—to most adults.

Ten years were enough to change someone, and while people like Maro looked somewhat different than the way they appeared in the past, no one looked more different than Asa.

He was over six feet tall, with a muscular build and manly features that put most men to shame.

He had his long blue hair trailing behind him, donning an open black jacket with nothing else underneath. As a result, his bare chest and abs showed on his well-toned skin.

Asa also had nice shorts on, giving his legs the chance to display their mature state. Sandals graced his feet, and overall, he was wearing a casual outfit—normal, when considering this was a party.

"What are you doing all the way here? I've been looking for you everywhere?" Asa smiled brightly as he finally closed the distance between him and Aloe.

'Oh really?' Aloe already knew he was lying.

Someone with Aloe's superior senses would have been able to sense her location, so there was no way he had been looking for her everywhere.

Still, this was merely a small detail, so she overlooked it.

"Well, I guess I just wanted some fresh air." She responded gently.

For a few seconds, Asa did not say anything. Instead, he stared at her almost curiously, before finally exhaling lightly.

"Is that so?" He took a seat beside her and smiled.

"Yep."

"Well, I get it. It can get a bit overwhelming at parties..."

It seemed Asa understood how she felt, and she chalked it up to be based on his personal experience.

'He really has grown up...' Stealing a close glance at him, she once again noticed his manly features, and it seemed unreal to her how a mere child had now become like this.

Even his tone and manner of speech had greatly changed.

"You've changed a lot, you know? It's impressive."

"You really think so?" Asa's smile widened further, and Aloe nodded instantly.

Surely he could see how much he had changed as well.

"Does that mean... you no longer see me as a kid?" The moment that question greeted her ears, Aloe became speechless.

Then... a little confused.

"What do you mean by that?"

"I mean, you no longer see me as the kid Asa from back then... right?" His question struck her once more, and Aloe genuinely did not know what to think about it.

What was he trying to imply?

And perhaps more importantly... what was she supposed to say in response?

"Miss Aloe, I have feelings for you. I know this is all sudden, but I genuinely feel this way."

The expression Aloe saw on Asa's face told her he was dead serious. It made her heart sink almost as much as it skipped a beat.

"Please go out with me!"

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Chapter 1158: A Man's Perspective

Asa's heart was racing faster than it had in several years as he stood in front of Aloe Vida.

His face reflected tension, and the muscles in his body grew rigid as a result of the confession of love he had just made to the woman before him.

'D-did I say it well? She isn't saying anything, though...'

As a Beastfolk, Asa's senses were several times higher than a human. He could feel everything with more intensity and with more accuracy.

That served as a benefit, but also a challenge in situations like this.

He fought back the sweat that began to form as a result of his nervousness, and gulped down the saliva that slowly coalesced in his throat.

The silence was killing him, and he was doing his best to hang tight.

"How long?" Finally, Aloe finally cut through the silence with her words.

Hearing her voice caused his heart to skip a beat, but he made sure to maintain a calm demeanor—at least, as well as he could manage.

There was no way he could make her think any less of him; not after making it this far.

'I've practiced for this moment so many times... I won't lose!' With that thought echoing in his mind, Asa proceeded to blurt out his response to her question.

"E-eh...?"

"How long have you felt this way? When did it start?" Aloe reemphasized her question, causing Asa's cognitive abilities to register it much better.

"A-ahh... well, I'm not sure..." He began, his lips scrunched together as he recollected the past.

"I've always looked up to you, and I respected you immensely. I suppose you were like a mother I never had. But... a lot has changed now, and when I saw you appear during the meeting... I nearly had a heart attack."

"Pfft! Come on, don't exaggerate."

"I'm not!" Asa couldn't believe Aloe was laughing so casually to him pouring out his feelings.

Everything he was saying was heartfelt and genuine.

"You were so radiant that I felt blown away. I instantly lost all the perception I used to have of you, and only had one thought... one desire..."

Asa stared straight into Aloe's eyes as he made his final declaration.

"I wanted you to be my mate! I want that for us, Miss Aloe. Please go out with me!" Repeating his words once more, Asa maintained his gaze.

The wind stopped blowing, and the entire environment turned calm, all seemingly waiting for Aloe's response to Asa.

The decorum pervading the atmosphere created an unbearable echo of silence that made Asa's heartbeat audible—at least according to him.

The tension climbed, reaching a crescendo that felt like an unattainable peak.

And then...

"I'm flattered, Asa. Truly. But, I don't view you that way." She gave her response.

Her voice was smooth and silky, stained with vestiges of sadness, but she made sure to maintain her smile.

Asa could see all of this, and his heart sank as a result.

"Why? You still see me as a kid, don't you? You don't see me as a man yet." Even though his heart was aching, he managed to utter the words that rang in his mind.

"Well... I mean, just a few months ago, you were a kid—at least, based on my perception of time. It's not easy for me to view you any other way."

Hearing Aloe say those words to him cut him deeper than any blade could have.

"Right now it just feels like my little Asa is all grown up. I feel strangely proud, you know? Kind of like how a mother would feel when her child is—"

"But I'm not a child! Not anymore!"

As soon as he raised his voice, Asa realized how childish he had just acted. He realized how he must have blown off any possibility—no matter how minuscule—by his action.

He had just proven her right.

Aloe only smiled at Asa, her face the perfect representation of an understanding reaction to his flustered and conflicted demeanor. Asa felt lost, disappointed, and most of all... frustrated.

However, before he got to dwell on it, he felt warm touches on his shoulders, feeling Aloe's hands hold onto them tightly.

"M-Miss Aloe..." He mumbled, his cheeks reddening as he felt her touch almost as if they were on his bare skin.

"Asa, I understand that you can have feelings for someone you respect. It's fine to have feelings for anyone. It's perfectly normal."

Asa felt his heart melt as she told him those words.

"But you have to understand that sometimes... people don't feel the same way you do. They either move on, or never saw you that way to begin with. That's life, Asa."

The more he heard, the more Asa felt a bittersweet sensation coursing through his entire body.

'This isn't fair, Miss Aloe...' His thoughts echoed as he stared at her. 'You're just making me fall for you more.'

"I recognize that you've grown up, Asa. I really should stop treating you like that little kid I used to know. So, how about this? Let's be friends. How does that sound?"

As Asa heard those words, he fell into deep contemplation.

Perhaps it was unrealistic to think he could win Aloe's heart like this. Should he just give up on the venture, or maybe start out as friends with her before trying later on?

As he thought about it, he looked at her smile, feeling drawn into her glossy lips. Something within and beneath him rose... and that was when he realized it.

"I refuse." He jumped to his feet, swiftly turning his back on Aloe in order to hide his bulging crotch.

No matter how hard he tried, he could not resist her. He could not see her as a friend. He could not endure a mere platonic relationship.

He wanted more!

"I don't just want to be your friend, Mi... I mean, Aloe! I want to be your man!" He declared, shifting his neck so he could look at her face.

As expected, she had an awkward smile on.

"You might not see me as a man now, but I won't give up. I'll make sure to prove it to you... that I can be a man you can rely on and fall in love with." It sounded incredibly cheesy, but Asa did not stop.

Instead, he aired out his heart.

"By the time you return from your expedition, I'll be a man strong enough to fight for you."

Asa soon realized his crotch had gone back to normal, so he smiled in relief, turning to face Aloe one final time.

"I won't give up. I'll always be waiting, fighting... for you."

"Asa..." Aloe covered her face, most likely in embarrassment. "Stop... you're acting so cute right now. It's harder to take you seriously now."

Hearing her response to yet another heartfelt confession, Asa's entire face turned beet red, and he realized he couldn't stand the humiliation any longer.

"G-good luck on your expedition!" Instantly, Asa raced away, his stomach aching him slightly as his legs carried him far from Aloe.

"I'll never give uuuuuuup!!!" Were his last words of declaration as he sped off.

And though Asa could not have possibly known this as he was making his escape, Aloe rested her head on her palm as she stared at him run off.

Her smile was a little different from earlier, and the glimmer in her eyes was also different from anything Asa had ever seen.

She had a fleeting thought as she watched his back and heard his echoing voice.

'He's really grown down there too...'

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Chapter 1159: The Hive Mission Begins [Pt 1]

The next day arrived like a blur, and I stood alongside my team as we made our final deliberations concerning the situation at hand.

All thirteen of them—Kuzon, Edward, Aloe, Ciara, Serah, Maria, Ana, Aurora, Lemi, Jerry, Z'ark, Beruel, Gerard—stood side by side as I faced them to deliver my address.

"We have two major objectives currently. One is to take care of the Hive that has formed a distance from here. We all have sufficient information on it, so I won't go into the details." I began, my hands steadily positioned behind me.

The mission was simple—destroy the Hive and leave no trace.

I would determine the ones who were capable of coming with me for the more important mission of stopping Legris.

"Of course, some of us will be sitting the match out, unless, of course, you require assistance. Kuzon, Edward, Ciara, and Aloe will not be participating in this event due to my knowledge of their capabilities."

The point of this exercise was to understand the current abilities and limits of everyone on the team. Since I already had a good idea of the capabilities of everyone who was displaced into different worlds, that left the ones who weren't.

'I won't say I can completely gauge Ciara's abilities, but based on my assessment thus far, her current capabilities should be enough.'

Besides, with her freakishly fast growth rate, it would be useless to try to know her current limits.

'Plus, I don't want her to interfere with Jerry's evaluation.'

Out of everyone present, Jerry was the only one who potentially didn't qualify. That meant this mission didn't just serve as an opportunity to understand his abilities better, but it was also a test to see if he could remain on the team or not.

It was the best I could do for him.

"I have sent my Automatons to study the Hive, so I have a good understanding of its structure."

The Automatons I sent were Gawain and two other assistants, considering their capabilities, so I was fairly confident of their assessment of the Hive's layout.

"It's essentially a huge mass of Nether, with several life forms detected within. One could call it a breeding ground for the Nether vermin. I suspect they possess parasitic tendencies, and the capability to rapidly corrupt Aether into Nether, hence explaining the reason the Hive has sustained itself for so long."

It also seemed to be expanding, so the sooner we took care of this mess, the better.

"Now then... I'll be teleporting us to the Hive. As explained before, you'll be operating as individual units so that it's easier to gauge your respective abilities."

Nether was a very dangerous element, and if they were to be facing something that could turn Aether into Nether, it was probably more efficient to operate in a group.

However, that would prove problematic in judging the effectiveness of their individual abilities.

'Everyone present can use Aether. That's the base requirement to even be considered for this task. But even that might not be enough this time.'

I was surprised to see Jerry possessing an Aether Core, but I suppose he spent the past ten years training like hell. I could only imagine how much time he dedicated to ensuring he was stronger.

That was probably why he was so desperate to go on this mission.

'Well, that and trying to impress Ciara maybe? Not that I don't understand the sentiment...'

After saying a few more things, I concluded my speech.

"Any questions?"

A hand swiftly went into the air, a prime example of enthusiasm if I had ever seen one before.

It belonged to Beast King Gerard.

"Destroying this Hive is important and all, but wouldn't it waste more time if we were to do it this way? I thought we were in a hurry to stop that Legris fellow."

The moment he asked the question, my heart sank.

"Haa..." I was rendered speechless, unable to say anything in response to his query.

It wasn't that there was no proper response to give, but... I was just too exasperated to say anything immediate.

"Were you not paying any attention to what he was saying at all?" Serah's voice loudly echoed in the silence, rescuing me from my current predicament.

I noticed a scowl on her face, and her arms were folded in impatience as he stared at a slightly shivering Gerard. Unlike me, it seemed she didn't have the patience to stomach the question.

"This world's time cycle is about thirty times faster than our normal world's timeline. That's why ten years passed here when only about three months passed for most of us who were displaced."

It was precisely as Serah said it. This was the side effect of Neron swapping worlds, and so even if we spent thirty hours in this world, only an hour would elapse in the normal sense of things.

A lot could happen within even the shortest time frame, but considering the utility of testing my teammates and understanding their abilities, it was worth the risk.

'Besides, time is relative. Some of us spent considerably longer in our world than others. So, even if we account for more or less time, it's impossible to know the kind of time Legris operates under.'

When considering that alone, it made more sense to operate as swiftly as possible while not neglecting important aspects of preparation just because we were in a rush.

"Any other question?" I asked, looking at the faces of everyone.

Perhaps one or two wanted to clarify a few things, but a mere glance at Serah's frown would scare anyone from trying to waste any more time.

'I wonder how she's holding up. At least she knows Neron is safe, but still...'

She hadn't seen her husband for ten years, and she was just recently told that he orchestrated his disappearance.

I wonder how she felt about it all.

'Well, he didn't orchestrate it. It's more like he regulated the event to flow a certain way. If he hadn't intervened, things would have ended up much worse for sure.'

I was sure Serah knew that, but that would probably not stop her from feeling hurt.

'I can only hope things work for the best. Once this is all over, things will return to normal...' My thoughts trailed as I activated my Arcana to transport everyone to the designated location of our mission.

'... Hopefully.'

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Chapter 1160: The Hive Mission Begins [Pt 2]

~VWUUUUSSSHH!~

In the vastness of space, supposed to be adorned by countless stars and blossoming planets, I and my allies appeared.

We were meant to witness the otherworldly beauty of the world beyond our planet. A place brimming with life, wonder, and energy.

Stars would radiate in their distance, and the nebulae would stretch on for as long as the senses could feel. We were meant to see orbiting planets, and perhaps the sun that held them together in a gravitational cycle.

However... all of that was missing.

Instead, what we witnessed was an empty void of darkness that seemed to stretch on forever.

The stars seemed to have dulled or completely vanished, and there seemed to be no planet in sight—just pure darkness and emptiness.

Other than the warbling blue light that accompanied us due to our teleportation, no brilliance of any sort occupied this world.

And all of this was thanks to one thing.

"The Hive." I whispered

Floating before us, like an overwhelming fortress that threatened to swallow the entire space whole, was a giant mass of Nether.

Its blackish purple form was so dense that it had taken on solid form, serving as a habitation for whatever monstrosities dwelled within it.

The Hive was a massive sphere, but it was much larger than any planet I had ever seen. It was not only bigger than a regular sun, but it had grown so large that it was more than big enough to occupy an entire solar system.

How many planets had been devoured by this mass of energy? How much energy had it absorbed already? Just how much more could it grow?

The fact that there were no stars or planets in sight meant it had attracted everything into its orbit and devoured it all.

Even though it was subtle, nearly imperceptible, I could see it grow bigger in mass and power with every second that passed. It must have had the chance to fester like this for ten years, so I imagined it would take a few more before it finally became large enough to consume a galaxy.

From a galaxy... it would go after an entire universe.

'If left unchecked, it could completely consume the Aether Tree...'

Of course, that wasn't going to happen now that we had caught wind of it.

"Well, here we are..." I turned to focus on my allies, who were also plenty distracted by the massive construct of Nether before them.

Since they could all use Aether, they were able to maintain their bodily functions in space, and they also had no problem perceiving all I was saying.

'The most worrisome aspect about all of this is the gravitational pull of that thing. But, I suppose that is a part of their training.'

The closer they got to the mass before us, the more they would be sucked into it. They risked being absorbed and integrated into the Hive, so I had to maintain a close watch on the people engaging in this mission.

"Just as we planned, you'll all take your respective positions around the Hive. Once you get closer, a defense mechanism will be triggered and enemies will begin to come out in droves." All of this information was obtained from Gawain, who had helped me investigate the Hive thoroughly.

"Your mission is simply to attack the creatures and ensure you do not get sucked into the Hive. Once all the creatures in the Hive are eliminated, your mission will be complete, and we'll proceed with the destruction of the Hive itself."

The mass before us was much larger than an entire solar system, and it was nearing galaxy size. It was probably too much for them to handle, so after they were done with taking care of the Nether Beasts, and I was satisfied with my observations, Kuzon or Edward would help to destroy the Hive completely.

'It's best I save my energy for when necessary...'

"Gawain." I called out, and instantly a blue distortion in space manifested not too distant from my side.

From within the spatial breach, my Automaton appeared.

"I have arrived, Master." He bowed his head, placing his right hand on his chest in obeisance.

"Are you done scouting the surrounding areas? Are there any surviving planets? Any life signature?"

"None at all. This seems to be a deserted corner of the universe."

Well, that made sense. The Hive would have destroyed anything close to it, and the fact that it was allowed to expand to this extent showed there was no sufficiently capable life form nearby to stop it.

"Well, you heard him. You are free to go all out in your battles. Ensure you do not get in the way of each other. There should be more than enough opponents to go around."

Kuzon, Aloe, Ciara, Edward, and I would sit back and enjoy the show. Gawain would also serve as a spectator.

"Your safety is a priority, though we will not interfere unless you specifically ask for help, or your life is almost forfeit," I added, noticing Jerry's body tense up as my words reached him.

'Of course, it goes without saying that anyone who gets rescued isn't fit for the mission at hand.'

I wondered how many people would pass, and how many wouldn't.

"Serah, Maria, Ana, Aurora, Lemi, Jerry, Z'ark, Beruel, and Gerard; all nine of you will begin your tests at the same time, so it'll be fair. There'll be no complaints or excuses afterward. There'll be no second chances too."

The mission to stop Legris was too important to be taken lightly.

"This is it, everyone." I returned my gaze to the imposing mass of Nether before us, smiling as I stared at it.

It was finally time to see what ten years had done to these people.

"You may begin."

~WHOOOOOOOOSSSSHHHHH!!!~

In an instant, before I could even blink, every single member of the team rushed forward, each parting from one another at intervals as they charged towards the Hive.

For some reason, it caused my grin to grow even wider.

"Haha! This should be fun."

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