

SPELLCRAFT 1271

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

Chapter 1271: Game Initiated

Silence.

Perhaps this was the best answer to give in a situation where no one knew precisely what to say.

Ciara had just proposed an interesting game, but no one dared to take the bait.

That was because they knew of its callous nature.

'If we decide to play the game, it's going to draw this confrontation out for even longer, which means more time on her end...' Kuzon thought to himself as he analyzed the situation.

'Unfortunately, it doesn't seem like she's giving us much of a choice here...'

As long as they had Inverse Energy on their side, Ciel could ensure they dragged out the fight for longer than necessary.

'If we pick them off one by one, we have a better chance of swiftly eliminating them and proceeding to the target.'

Right now, Ciel was in control. She could see everyone and everything around her, and there was no way they could pull off a universe-destroying attack without her notice.

In the end, they had to take her—or at least, most of the adversaries—out before proceeding with the crux of their objective.

'The ideal situation is for Serah, Edward, and I to quickly eliminate our adversaries and reach the goal.'

Fighting Ciel could also be the most optimal strategy, but knowing her, it was a risky venture to attempt.

Since they were the key players—the arrowhead of their mission—Kuzon knew it would be ill advised to tackle Ciel.

'We can have the other strong or intelligent members of our team handle her. As for the three of us, it's best we handle the weaker ones so we can swiftly end it and move to the real thing.'

Conserving energy was something that crossed his mind, but since they had the full backing of the Constellations this time, he didn't think it would be a problem.

'Right now we need to be decisive. There's no room to hesitate any longer.'

Kuzon didn't care if he was playing Ciel's game or not.

What mattered was that they beat her at it.

'Ana and Maria, you handle Ciel. The rest of you... pick your opponents!' Kuzon sent his mental message to everyone in the team.

'Serah and Edward, make sure you pick weaker opponents so it's easier to defeat them and advance!'

Right now, efficiency was what mattered most.

~UNDERSTOOD!~

The response of the majority echoed in Kuzon's mind, though one person was yet to respond.

~I'm taking Gerard.~

Serah's response to Kuzon's instruction made him sharply turn to her.

'Are you being personal right now?'

~Don't worry, it won't jeopardize the mission. After all... ~

Serah smiled, her eyes seeming more distant than usual.

~... He's weaker than I am.~

Once she established this, exuding all the confidence one would expect from someone of her caliber, Kuzon sighed and nodded in agreement.

'Very well. Let us begin.'

Right as Kuzon concluded his thought, Ciel was just finishing her second suggestion.

"... I'll choose for you!"

~WHOOOOOOOSSSHHH!!~

At that split moment, Maria and Ana rushed towards Ciel as the rest of the group charged at whoever they chose as their targets.

In no time, the once well-orchestrated confrontation...

~BOOMMMMMMMMMMMM!!~

... Devolved into an all-out war.

"Hahahahahaha!!!"

Ciel's maniacal laughter echoed as she freely dived into the vacuum of space.

She was being chased by Maria and Ana, and based on the expression they both had, they were deathly serious about eliminating her.

"To think you would choose two children to fight me..." She chuckled to herself.

Her words rang dripped with both malice and amusement as she turned to stare at the two women who actively chased her.

Maria was currently in her Archangel Drive, and from what it seemed like, she also had her Original Magic activated.

As for Ana, she was currently shrouded in energy, but her body was covered in machinery that boosted her speed—enough so she could barely keep up with Maria's speed.

"The both of you are too slow, you know?" Ciel laughed as she freely flew further away from the cocoon.

"Is that so?" Ana smiled, her tone much calmer than one would expect, given the situation.

The chase continued, until the cocoon was already far from sight.

"Why are you drifting further from the cocoon? Isn't that detrimental for you?" Ana asked.

"Not really. I can still pretty much see all that is happening there right now. Besides, it won't be easy for any of your friends to defeat their adversaries."

Ciel's response caused Ana's smile to fade away, and even the emotionless Maria deepened her glare.

"As for you two... I could say the same."

Ciel finally stopped her free dive, ascending high above Maria and Ana.

The two also stopped shy of catching up with Ciel, and though they kept a short distance from her, they elevated themselves to the same height she occupied.

"I think this is far enough. We can have an honest fight here." Ciel muttered.

It would be no exaggeration to say that her words shocked Ana and Maria.

"An honest fight? Surely you jest." Ana chuckled slightly.

There was nothing about Ciel's personality that indicated anything honest.

She was a liar, a manipulator, and a downright psychopath that would do anything to achieve her goals.

That was why, even now, Ana and Maria were still on their toes with her.

"I know the two of you simply want to keep me occupied. You'll try to turn this into a battle of attrition, doing your best to ensure I am incapable of interfering with your buddies when they are ready to destroy the cocoon." Ciel said.

"Wow. To think our plan was so obvious..." Ana's sarcastic response echoed in the vastness of the space they occupied.

It rang hollow, however, as the tension got deeper.

"There's no need to feign bravado. I should probably tell you this, but I plan on killing the two of you." Despite uttering such bone-chilling words, Ciel maintained her smile.

"If you do not take this fight seriously, you'll die. That's probably the best alternative, but... you know..."

Pink hues began to appear on Ciel's face as she tightly held her cheeks with both her hands.

"... I want you to struggle so much..."

Steam proceeded from her lips as she obsessively stared at Maria and Ana, her tongue dripping with saliva.

"Agonize. Suffer. Cry. Plead. Despair."

Every syllable she let out carried a heavy weight of purpose.

And the more she spoke, the more power within her swelled.

"In the end... I want to watch all of you suffer demise in the most excruciating way possible!"

Ciel licked her lips, and before long, her expression returned to the way it was before.

The calm, unassuming smile.

"So, yes... an honest fight."

Maria and Ana were already revolted by Ciel's display, to the point where they had both taken combative stances.

"You're sick." Ana said in disgust.

"I get that a lot." Ciel shrugged. "Thanks for the compliment."

At this point, the exchange of words was meaningless.

Ana and Maria glanced at each other and nodded in agreement.

This was no longer the time to be holding back.

They had to use everything at their disposal!

"True Fusion..." They both whispered.

"... [Constellation Regalia]!"

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

Chapter 1272: Constellation Regalia

~VWUUUUUUUUUUUUUMMMMM!!!~

The world responded to Ana and Maria's call with a deafening roar of erupting energy.

Aether gathered around the two women respectively, transforming their bodies into something else.

... Something more.

Maria's body was now covered in clear white armor, glistening like a gem polished to the limits of purity.

Fine linen-like fabrics—almost transparent, also covered her body, like the robe of an empress. They seemed so soft, yet the Aether they emitted was phenomenal.

Her helmet-crown changed its shape, now having a more slender build, and her Halo glowed ever so brighter as it floated above her head.

The wings behind her now seemed to be of pure energy, radiating the same pure white that her armor was made of.

As her long hair danced behind her, the accessories on and above it gleamed with grand magnitude.

Nine Gems decorated the crown she wore, and her eyes shone with multicolored light.

"[True Light]."

The nine varying swords of different colors manifested around her, all of them creating an ethereal light that she bathed in.

Utilizing both her Original Magic and Fusion State, Maria stood majestically before Ciel.

As for Ana, she wasn't too far off either.

Her entire body was covered in what could only be described as a tech-suit.

From top to bottom, Ana donned a hard exoskeleton that had an obsidian black and glowing yellow Aesthetic.

Star-like formations and patterns decorated the armor, and every single aspect of the hardened plates was honed to perfection.

Perhaps the most important thing to note was Ana's new size thanks to the aid of the armor.

Thanks to its several layers of both defensive and offensive capabilities, and the overall state of the armor, it made her appear almost twice her size.

Her new height, and overall size, made her even taller than Maria by a small margin.

Her helmet had glowing eyes, and everything seemed to be perfectly shut in—the perfect armor anyone could possess.

"It's still a shame that I don't have an Original Magic, but I guess I'll compensate with this..." Ana smiled as she spoke to herself.

Whatever she was compensating herself with—whether it was the overwhelming power of a Constellation, or something else—remained a mystery.

In conclusion, both women were done with their transformation, all within the fraction of a moment, and they were more than ready to face their adversary.

"It's still surprising that little ones like you could gain the favor of Constellations. Even though their powers will be limited through your usage, they still possess an immense threat to someone like me."

When facing the overwhelming might of a Constellation's Representation, not even the seemingly all-powerful Arcanas at her disposal was going to do her any good.

Her [Eye Of The Wise] was already pretty occupied with observing the outcome of all the fights, and so it would be tasking to utilize it to its full potential when fighting the two ladies.

Even at its full potential, it was still only non-combative Magic—nowhere near enough to give her an edge here.

The most she could do was flee, and even then it wasn't assured that she would be able to escape two Constellation Hosts.

But that wasn't enough for Ciel.

Her goal was already established—the elimination of her enemies by all means necessary.

That left her with only one option.

"Hehehehehehehehehehe..."

Her Trump Card.

"[Original Magic: Forge Of Creation]."

The moment she said that, reality around everyone and everything seemed to warp—almost as if the world had turned to glass.

Light rose from Ciel, to the point where it could be mistaken for a star, and golden-white radiation drowned the surroundings.

"Begone." Maria muttered, completely unbothered by the explosion of illumination.

The instant she said so, the lights vanished.

Her Constellation's Authority, [Wish], allowed such a thing to be possible with mere utterance.

"Did the radiation affect you in any way?" She turned to ask the armored Ana, who was still after the entire blast.

"No. This armor is pretty much impervious to anything—it didn't affect me in the slightest."

"Of course, it didn't!" Ciel's voice interrupted the two of them, her eyes nearly bloodshot as a result of how excited she was looking.

"That was only the preparation phase... and now it's complete!"

Something about Ciel's tone seemed ominous—and so was the energy that was clustering in front of her.

Right beside each other, two separate formations of energy rapidly gathered at an astronomical rate.

They assembled so quickly that it felt too dangerous to let them continue.

"Dissipate." Maria spoke the instant she noticed the formation was nearing completion.

However...

~ZZZTTTTZZZZZ~

... It didn't work!

"W-what?! How is that possible?!" Maria's eyes widened in shock.

Her usually emotionless expression broke down for the first time since her transformation.

"Perhaps you didn't use enough Aether?" Ana asked.

"No. It's not that..."

Maria was certain she had utilized enough Aether. Besides, her [Wish] automatically allocated the right amount of energy to consume when she dealt with a phenomenon.

However, this was different.

It felt like her [Wish] could not apply to the two clusters of energy that were forming.

But... that was impossible!

"Let's do it the old fashioned way, then!" Ana yelled, instantly creating a blade from seemingly nowhere.

Her sword was obsidian black, and it radiated with phenomenal energy that felt overpowered.

Maria nodded and swiftly grabbed her 'Black' blade.

The blade that only had one purpose.

Reducing all it touched into dust—the power of sheer disintegration!

~WHOOOOOSSSHHHH!!!~

Both women charged at Ciel's energy clusters, their speed impossible to keep up with as they brandished their blade and lunged it at their target.

Ana took the one closest to her, while Maria took the other one.

~VWUUUUUUMMMMMMM!!!~

The blades descended.

~CLANG!~

~CLANG!~

They were both stopped—one parried, while the other was blocked against.

This was yet another impossible occurrence.

At this point, both Maria and Ana had nearly bloodshot eyes as they stared at the entities that had now emerged from the clusters of energy.

They were none other than themselves!

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

Chapter 1273: Forge Of Creation

"This is...?!"

"H-how...?"

The two women were undoubtedly stunned by the two existences they were confronted with.

It all happened so fast—the instant their blades were about to touch the clusters of energy and eviscerate them.

From the depth of the energy emerged creatures that resembled themselves—or rather, their counterparts.

Maria's 'Black' was currently being shielded by a shield made by this 'thing' that looked like an armored Ana.

As for Ana, her blade was parried by a 'Black' blade similar to the one that Maria was currently wielding... by another Maria.

The two women were facing versions of their counterparts.

"Hahaha! You should see the looks on your faces! Such fools!" Ciel cackled in amusement as she stared at the two.

At that instant, the doppelgängers made to attack both Ana and Maria, but the two instantly detected this and leaped back.

The short window between their retreat and the actions of the doppelgängers was so minuscule that even a brief moment of hesitation would have proven to be fatal.

"Haaa..." As the two leaped away, Ana heaved a sigh in sheer disbelief.

"They have our reaction time too? That's insane..."

However, the moment she uttered this, Ana realized this wasn't the most impressive thing about the two expressionless marionettes in front of them.

"They also mimic our Representations. It's no wonder your [Wish] didn't work..."

It was trite among Constellations that each one had a particular role to play in existence.

As such, no Representation could override another.

"When you told the clusters to dissipate, they didn't respond because that is contrary to the trite..."

Of course, this revelation would only become more worrying for them the more they realized its implications.

"That's right! I have duplicated your abilities with these doppelgängers! Since my Arcanas won't do any good, I thought it was best to fight fire with fire!" Ciel grinned with excitement.

It appeared as though she was a child telling friends about her new toys.

"That should be impossible. You shouldn't have enough energy." Ana murmured.

"Haha! Is that so? Well... I'll leave it to your imagination."

The moment Ciel said that, Ana felt stupid for her earlier insinuation.

'Of course! It was obvious from the start!'

She would have slapped her face if the situation wasn't so dire.

"The energy you stole from the Constellation Realm. You took some for yourself, right?"

"Ding! Ding! Correct! What a sharp girl!" Ciel's broad smile betrayed her childish reaction.

It strangely felt like two different personalities speaking.

"Did Legris approve of that too?" Ana asked, almost flippantly.

"Legris doesn't need to know about all my actions. It's the same way I don't need to know about his. As long as we both fulfill our roles and get the job done, there's no problem."

Ciel's straightforward answer pretty much established the relationship she had with Legris.

However, Ana wasn't done yet.

'I need to stall...' Her thoughts trailed as she leaked out another smile behind her mask.

"You were able to achieve this thanks to that light from earlier, right?" Maria's voice suddenly echoed amidst the tension.

"I didn't know the power of Constellations was that easy to replicate."

This was a valid conundrum to have, and since it bought time, Ana considered it perfect timing that Maria had spoken when she did.

"I've been dealing with Constellation Shards alongside Legris and Stefan for a long time now. It would be strange if I wasn't familiar with the way they function."

Ciel's straightforward answer shocked the girls, yet they could not deny how it made sense.

"My second Original Magic [Forge Of Creation] allows me to make anything as long as I have enough information on the properties that constitute it. I used it to replicate the Arcanas, and now I can use it to replicate the Representation of the Constellations whose properties have been thoroughly examined by me." Ciel raised both her hands, placing them on the respective shoulders of the doppelgängers.

"That burst of light was just for scanning your individual abilities and respective compatibility with the Representations you've Bonded with. As a result, I was able to make perfect two Hosts to house the power of their most suitable Constellations."

In essence, Maria and Ana's doubles were merely props—vessels used to carry power.

"Once I'm done with you two, I'll do the same with the others and make perfect Hosts for all the Constellation Representations I have in my arsenal."

It was at this moment that Ana and Maria realized just how dire the situation was.

Ciel was the one who had the advantage all along... they just hadn't realized it until now.

"All that's left for you two is death. However, I'm in a bit of a pickle here..." She muttered, looking at both Ana and Maria, then alternating stares with the lifeless copies she stood behind.

"Should I let you fight your respective doppelgängers, or should I switch things up a little?"

As the question echoed in the air, Ciel made up her mind at that very moment.

"Switching things up seems more fun. Yes... Maria should fight Ana, and Ana should fight Maria." Her golden eyes glowed even brighter as she cackled in amusement.

"Let's see how you do, little children..."

Ciel gilded backwards, making enough space between herself and her creation.

"Begi—!"

Before Ciel could announce anything, her eyes suddenly bulged in an unexpected realization.

It was a realization that eluded both Maria and Ana, but she could detect it thanks to her first Original Magic.

'No way...'

At that moment, one of the nine spawns of Legris had been vanquished.

'... Already?!'

It hadn't even been very long, and yet one was already down? It wasn't even because the spawns were weak, since Ciel knew of their abilities well.

It only meant one thing.

The opponent was just that much stronger.

'This is unexpe—'

Right as she was muttering those words, yet another spawn was defeated.

'What in the world?!'

Before she was able to recoil from the shock, the third elimination occurred.

'T-three?! In a span of how long?!'

Ciel, who had the upper hand in her own fight, leaked out a sweat for the first time.

'This is bad...'

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

Chapter 1274: Stand Proud, You Were Strong

[Moments Earlier]

Serah watched in silence as the blackened form of Gerard stood right in front of her.

The once-proud Beast King had now been reduced to nothing more than a mindless marionette who served only to eliminate Legris' enemies.

Her crimson eyes took in his pathetic form—his pale body, the darkness that danced around his body, and the lifeless eyes that glared at her.

She knew by instinct that any move she made would be followed by instant retaliation, so she took her time to observe him.

'The rest have departed with their opponents, and even I had to lead him away from the cocoon.'

At this point, Serah knew the best thing to do was fight Gerard and rush to destroy Legris' cocoon, so she decided to pull herself from the remnant sentiments that plagued her.

"You're no longer Gerard, so I don't know why I feel this way. This immense guilt in my heart... I can't properly convey it to him." She murmured.

Even though it was pointless, Serah still felt the need to pour out her heart.

"I don't know if you're there or not. You're probably not, but..." A small smile formed on her face.

"Thank you for everything, Gerard. For protecting me. For loving me. For sacrificing yourself for me. For us."

Her eyes were glowing now, and the Aether within her was rising.

"I don't care what anyone else says or thinks of you."

Gerard grunted slightly, most likely due to sensing the dangerous amount of power Serah was building up.

"You're a decent guy. You were able to stick to your ideals to the end and protect what you cared about. That's neat as hell."

Serah sniffed a little as she concluded her last words.

And what was his response?

~VWUUUUUUUUUUUUUMMMMMMM!!!~

Gerard's body instantly morphed into his [Ultimate Transformation: Grand Final Phase].

Unlike in the past, however, the inverse energy that now shrouded him encircled his body like torrents of power.

He was completely bathed in that power, serving as both a defensive barrier, and also an offensive tool.

No one could even get close to him, else they would be consumed into nothingness.

"Grrrrrr..." His grotesque form leaked out deep growls of malice as he glared at Serah.

His intentions were clear—destroy her at all costs.

In response to this transformation, and the feral state that Gerard was currently in, Serah calmly let go of her smile.

She sighed silently, preparing herself for what was to come.

"[Grand Fusion: Dual Constellation Regalia]"

~BOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOO MMMM!!!~

An overwhelming surge of power radiated from Serah, painting the world around her in both black and red power.

Her body was now shrouded in a black armor, lined with crimson power that seemed like it would explode at any given moment.

Like a combination of black magma and lava, her body was decorated in a seemingly unbreakable armor and shimmering red energy.

The whites of her eyes were now black, while her irises were red.

Her arms and legs wore blackness like gloves, while her shoulder, breasts, and certain other regions had similar armor plates.

The rest were simply pure energy.

Her long hair shone crimson, and she had two large black horns protrude from her forehead.

Wing the wings of a demon, and the tail of a devil, she magnificently stared at her target.

"The power of Destruction and Corruption..." Serah murmured as she stared at her clenched fist.

Her power of Destruction came from Taurus, while the Representation of Corruption belonged to Scorpio.

With both of them as her backers, the power that swirled within and without her defied imagination.

"Shall we begin?" She whispered, watching as Gerard took his pose, preparing to charge.

A sad gaze traveled from her to the primal creature—almost as if she did not see him as an adversary, but a pitiful dog needed to be put out of its misery.

~WHOOOOOOOOSSSSSHHHH!!!~

Space shattered as Gerard launched himself towards Serah, his darkness consuming everything in his path.

With a roar of rage, and power that defied imagination, he charged at the motionless Serah.

And then—

~WHUUUUUUUUUMMMM!!!~

He suddenly stopped, unable to take another step forward.

Why?!

"You poor thing."

Serah's hand was firmly on his throat, and all the accumulated dark energy that had run rabid on his body were banished.

... Almost like a flame being put out by a rush of wind.

"G-gurgh! Rughh!!!" Gerard struggled to set himself free, tightly gripping Serah's firm fingers as he desperately attempted to pull them away from their lock.

Unfortunately for him, it was impossible.

"R-ROOOOAAAARRRGGGHH!!!"

Gerard roared. He screamed desperately, banging his massive arms all over Serah, but none of his limbs even reached her.

Not without being completely eviscerated by an invisible force.

"Destruction. Corruption." Serah whispered as she looked at Gerard's beastly state.

"I could say it's the same as your inverse energy."

Nothing Gerard did was working. He simply kept squirming helplessly in the presence of Serah's overwhelming power.

His body was already being covered in blackness—one that was different from what he had before.

This wasn't inverse energy; It was an overflow of Serah's energy in the form of Corruption.

Against this, not even Gerard could resist.

"We would simply cancel each other out. Except for one variable..." Serah tightened her grip on Gerard's neck, instantly crushing everything there.

It caused the deceased Beast King to vomit blood, but Serah cared for none of that.

Her unoccupied fist was already preparing her final strike.

"I'm just stronger."

~WHOOOOOOOOOOOOOUMMMMMMM!!!~

The strike defied space itself, destroying and corrupting all that it met until it reached Gerard itself.

That was the finishing blow.

The only one that mattered.

~BOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOMMMMMMM!!!~

At that moment, Gerard turned into dust, and even his dust became utterly eviscerated as a result of Serah's Destruction.

Nothing was left of Gerard—nothing but the fond memory she had left of him.

'Wherever you are now...' Serah turned to the cocoon, only smiling faintly as she floated towards it.

"Stand proud, Gerard. You were strong."

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

Chapter 1275: The Task At Hand

'Now... for the mission!'

Serah rushed to the site of the cocoon, reaching there almost in an instant thanks to her new form.

As soon as she arrived right in front of the massive orb, though, she was met with a voice.

"I've been expecting you."

Her body fidgeted in shock for a moment, considering how she hadn't sensed any presence until the words were spoken.

Swiftly turning her attention to her side, she saw Kuzon floating calmly.

'How long has he been waiting? He was here first?' Serah asked herself.

She was certain that she had swiftly ended her battle with Gerard, so it came as a surprise that Kuzon was already done with his task.

"I know what you're wondering, but don't think too much of it. My opponent was probably just weaker." Kuzon shrugged.

His expression remained the same—serious and unperturbed—as he locked his sight on the black chrysalis they had to destroy.

"Didn't your opponent have a Constellation Shard, though? That means they were strong."

Unlike Gerard, whose power was only amplified by his new state, Kuzon had faced a previous Constellation Host.

It was already clear who would be stronger.

"That doesn't matter. In the end, the mission is—"

Before Kuzon said anything else, he paused and looked behind him, casting his gaze from the black cocoon for the first time.

"Looks like Edward is done as well. Perfect."

As soon as he uttered those words, Edward appeared right beside Serah and Kuzon, a smile coursing through his face.

"Sorry for being late! Looks like I was the last to arrive."

Kuzon shrugged and returned his gaze to his front. As for Serah, she returned Edward's smile and nodded.

"Since we're all here, we can begin." Kuzon concluded, his eyes now aflame with golden energy.

~VWUUUUUUSSSSHHHHHH!~

Kuzon's entire body transformed at that point.

He became the personification of golden energy, and his hair grew far longer than before, reaching his very toes.

His eyes glowed with white radiation, and his crown floated regally on his head.

A flowing emperor's robe decorated his body, and he had a golden scepter in his hand.

His body was adorned in earrings, chains, bracelets, and rings, all of them pulsating with power—boundless power.

"[Constellation Emperor's Transfiguration]." He whispered calmly.

With the current power he had, he was incomparable to the previous transformation he had in the past.

"I suppose I should get to full form as well..." Edward smiled, his body instantly undergoing transformation.

"[Supreme Martial State: Aries]."

His hair became shimmering white, and then silvery glows began to appear all about it.

Golden tattoos began to manifest on his bare body, and firm golden horns protruded from his forehead.

A gold-like gem became engraved in his forehead, and more tattoos decorated its surroundings.

All of his hair became cloud-like, and his beard turned into fluff.

... Almost like wool.

His muscles bulged with greater power than ever, and pure white and golden energy surged within him, as well as manifested around him in the form of rabid lightning.

The combination of his hybrid azure and amber Aether Core, and the Constellation's power within him, had birthed something new.

A power that was boundless in its own right.

"We're all set."

As Kuzon, Edward, and Serah stood before the black cocoon in their peak forms, they nodded at one another and began to prepare their respective attacks.

It would be based on brute strength, reinforced by all the energy they could muster in a single shot.

And, once they were done...

~You'll be teleported away from there!~

Once again reassured by Aquarius' words, they began to initiate their combined attack.

"Grand—!"

"Supreme—!"

"Ultimate—!"

"NOT SO FAST!" A voice sharply interrupted them from continuing their attacks.

It belonged to none other than Ciel.

~WHUUUUSH!~

She appeared right in front of them, just a few meters away from the cocoon's surface.

"Well, this is unexpected. To think you three would already be done..." She muttered, a strained smile on her face.

"We won't fall for any more delays." Kuzon spoke in full composure.

His fixation on the task was absolute, and he was about to resume generating his attacks when Ciel snapped her fingers in a jiffy.

"I wouldn't do that if I were you! Not unless you want these two to die!"

"T-those are—?!"

"Maria...?! Ana?!"

Both Edward and Serah both generated surprised reactions to seeing the hostages at Ciel's mercy.

Right in Ciel's grasp were Maria and Ana, and she gladly presented them to the trio in amusement.

They were both unconscious, but there was no mistaking the two of them.

Everything about them was the same as the Maria and Ana they knew and loved.

"Death, huh? We were already resolved for that when we came here." Kuzon responded coldheartedly.

His response came as a surprise to both Edward and Serah, considering his lover was also among the hostages.

Even then, Kuzon did not bat an eye.

"I know you're bluffing. Those two aren't Ana and Maria. I don't know how you were able to mimic them so perfectly, but Ana and Maria are currently fighting their doppelgängers in the distance." Kuzon pointed behind him, though he still refused to take his eyes off Ciel, and ultimately the cocoon.

"W-what?! How did you—?!"

"I don't need to explain myself to you. We only need to fulfill the task." Kuzon responded succinctly once again.

"The both of you, do not be distracted by her. Let's finish this once and for a—"

"Attack them, you two!" Ciel commanded, instantly releasing the previous hostages, who swiftly shifted gears in an instant.

Maria transformed into her Constellation Regalia and even activated her Original Magic, while Ana shrouded herself in her Constellation regalia, and had now created multiple weapons to attack.

They all approached Kuzon and his allies in a flash, hoping to take them by surprise.

"Pointless..." Kuzon whispered.

~WHOOOOOOOSSSHHH!!~

One invisible flex of energy was more than enough for him as a sigh escaped his lips.

What happened next stunned everyone.

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

Chapter 1276: All That Matters

~CRACK!~

The ultimate armor that Ana's doppelgänger wore shattered to pieces, and Maria's armor and entire attire experienced the same fate.

It was almost as if they were fragile as glass, broken off their skin in no time at all.

Once that happened, their demise soon followed.

~VWUUUUUUSSSHHHHH!!!~

The both of them were consumed by golden energy, burned to cinders before they even realized it.

Afterwards, silence erupted.

"We're done here." Kuzon broke the decorum with his tone of resolve.

His gaze narrowed as it pierced through Ciel's facade.

"Now let us proceed."

"H-how did you...?" Ciel already knew Kuzon was not going to explain his actions to her.

Based on his expression, she could already sense his disinterest in her and the obsession he had towards the mission.

'I need to stop them no matter what!' Her thoughts echoed.

That meant utilizing her Trump Card once again.

'It's going to be quite draining, especially considering how I just used it to create two more doppelgängers for those two—all in vain—but the returns should be worth it!'

If she could perfectly replicate Kuzon, then she would have access to all the powers he possessed.

That would even the playing field considerably.

'The other two also seem incredibly powerful! They're far stronger than I expected!'

That meant she couldn't hold back any longer.

'[Original Magic: Forge Of Creation]'

The world suddenly took on a glass-like form, almost as if space had become mirror-like

This surface tension was followed by a flash of bright white light, with golden undertones buried underneath.

'Hahaha!' Ciel laughed to herself.

Now that the light had covered everyone and everything in the vicinity, she had all she required to mimic their power.

'Now... for the perfect duplicates!' She grinned.

The bright light faded, and three clusters of energy manifested in front of her.

'Hehehe... hehehe...!'

Everything was working according to her plan! All the procedures had been completed, and now there was no stopping her!

'Let's see how you handle dealing with versions of yourself—!'

~ZZZTTTTZZZZ~

Right before her eyes, Ciel watched the three clusters of energy buzz and dissipate in failure.

None of them successfully birthed the duplicates that were promised.

"E-eh...?" Ciel's brows twitched as she watched the impossible unfold.

'How is this possible? How did this happen?'

She somehow had a lingering suspicion, and it caused her to raise her eyes to watch Kuzon.

His glowing eyes stared at her condescendingly—almost as if he could not be bothered by the shameful failure of her Magic.

"W-what... what in the world... WHAT DID YOU DO TO MY MAGIC, YOU FILTHY CHILD!"

Ciel's breathing became heavy following her scream. She had used too much Aether and fortitude in activating her Original Magic.

Exhaustion tugged at her now, but she could not afford to show any weakness.

Not while the situation was this dire.

"You two... let us proceed." Kuzon ignored Ciel's voice, instead facing Serah and Edward.

Even though they nodded at him, they were just as confused and flabbergasted as Ciel.

The both of them seemed to want to know what the fuss was all about, and what Kuzon had actually done.

However, even to his teammates, Kuzon had no interest in explaining.

'The moment I detected her Magic, I used my Authority to override it before it was complete. Since I possess greater authority—on par with the Constellations—in this form, she never stood a chance...' His thoughts trailed.

It didn't matter what was thrown at him. As long as he had more authority than that very thing, he could override it entirely.

That was why Kuzon felt this entire exchange was pointless.

... Why he only cared about the mission.

"Answer me, you insole—!"

~VWUUUUUSSSSHHHH!~

Before Ciel concluded her hysterical shriek, she was suddenly engulfed in golden flames.

Her body burned to its very marrow, and within that same moment, nothing was left of her.

"Bothersome..." Kuzon murmured.

Edward and Serah exchanged glances, both unsure of what to feel about Kuzon's string of behaviors.

Surely, it was the most efficient route, so why were they a little anxious about it.

"How dare you interrupt me? Have you no respect? You insolent fool!"

The silence was once again interrupted by Ciel and her resumed bickering.

"As expected. You've replicated yourself as well. This is why I didn't want to engage you, to begin with..." Kuzon groaned.

Initially, he was disappointed in both Maria and Ana, considering he had given them the task of keeping Ciel busy, yet here she was.

However, the more he thought of it, the more he realized there was no reason for that.

'Ciel probably has a duplicate facing Maria and Ana right now. Or maybe that is the original, and this here is the duplicate...'

No matter how he sliced it, Maria and Ana were never going to be able to completely hold her back.

'So she copied Legris and his annoying duplication, huh? How bothersome.'

Kuzon's increasing irritation stemmed from the anxiety that kept tugging at his heart.

Any moment now, and that cocoon could birth the new Legris—or whatever plan he had.

Every second counted, and it felt like he was the only one who recognized that.

'We don't have time for conversations or pointless battles.'

Which meant there was only one solution—one way out from his current dilemma.

"We're going to commence our attacks. Whether she's in the way or not... it doesn't matter." Kuzon declared.

He was tired of Ciel, and if they could just ignore her and continue their task, that would be for the best.

"Are you sure?"

"Shouldn't we be more cautious?"

Edward and Serah respectively asked, and to that, he clenched his fist in mild annoyance.

"We didn't come here to be cautious of Ciel! We have to destroy that cocoon before time runs out!"

He knew his tone was harsh, but Kuzon didn't care at the moment.

What was at stake far outweighed any consideration he could have for anyone else.

"We destroy the cocoon, and it's mission complete!"

That was all that mattered.

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

Chapter 1277: The Losers

"Fine. Let's end things already."

Serah's response to Kuzon's words were met with a nod from Edward.

All three of them seemed to be in agreement as they looked at Ciel, and beyond at the cocoon.

"Perfect! Let's begin."

As already established by their past encounter, raw power mixed with the sheer energy they possessed was the best way to ruin the cocoon.

Unlike using regular Spells, this was much more difficult to do—especially considering the size of the cocoon was as big as a universe itself.

This was precisely why all three of them had decided to time their blows in order to achieve consecutive strikes.

And now, that time had come.

The scepter on Kuzon's hand slowly turned liquid. It wrapped itself around Kuzon's fist, causing it to shimmer even more than the rest of his body—if that was even possible.

Serah's dominant fist was now blackened intensely, with black and red energy dancing around it like a rabid storm.

Edward's muscles bulged intensely, with glowing veins pulsating underneath his skin.

Clearly, they were prepared.

"Let's go!"

~WHOOOOOOOOSSSHHHHH!!!~

They lunged forth, instantly tearing through whatever fabric of reality that stood in their way.

Space shattered, and every law of the world was broken around them as they neared the black sphere.

Until finally...

~BOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOMMMMMMMMMMMMMMMM!!!~

... They landed their hit.

Kuzon used his immensely glowing hand to land his most powerful strike, while Serah used her devastating strike to pound the cocoon.

Edward clasped both hands together and crushed the cocoon's surface.

All of this happened simultaneously, in different areas.

The darkness shattered like glass, unable to handle the combined strength of the three of them.

And just as expected... it exploded into sheer oblivion.

~WHUUUUUSSSHHHH!~

Kuzon, Edward, and Serah were instantly teleported to the border of the neighboring universe, all according to the plan.

The universe which housed the cocoon was also pruned, leaving setting it apart from the rest of the Aether Tree.

All of this happened in an instant, leaving no time to fully bask in the success of the mission.

"Haaa..." Kuzon heaved a sigh of relief, almost as if a heavy burden had been removed from his shoulders.

As he stared at the drifting universe, cut off from the rest of reality, his smile widened.

"That was easier than I thought."

Somehow, he had been worried that the plan wouldn't go accordingly, and they would somehow be too late.

Fortunately, that wasn't the case.

"We succeeded? We really did it...?" Even though Serah's words seemed more like questions than actual declarations, she had a relieved smile on as well.

As far as their knowledge served, no one else had to die, and there were no hidden surprises they could not handle.

In the end, they won.

"We should probably go and assist the o—"

"Shouldn't that universe have exploded by now?" Edward's question caused Kuzon to cease his own suggestion.

"What?"

"I mean, with the cocoon being destroyed, shouldn't it's contents spill into the universe and consume it?" Edward added.

Right now, they stood at the edge of the Aether Tree, watching as a universe got pruned from the collection of nigh infinite branches.

Surely, the universe in question had to be destroyed... right?

"You're right. It should be destroyed at this point." Serah murmured, turning her gaze to Kuzon.

He gave her a confused expression, almost as if dread was slowly catching up to him.

"What's going on Aquarius? Why isn't the universe being destroyed?" Kuzon yelled, his voice traveling into the abyss.

For a moment, there was silence.

And then, a voice emerged.

~The universe has been pruned. We no longer hold any influence over it, neither can we sense what goes on within it.~

The moment Aquarius said that, something tightened in Kuzon's chest.

"N-no..."

He instantly realized the truth.

"We've been played."

Right now, the pruned universe was separate from their reality—stopping them from properly interfering with it.

"That means we can no longer return there..." Kuzon whispered, staring at the world from a distance.

"... Even if the Cocoon was never destroyed."

"What are you talking about? We destroyed the cocoon!" Serah swiftly objected, a frown instantly appearing on her face.

"Did we? Or did we destroy a cocoon?"

Once Kuzon said this, Serah's eyes twitched, and she too began to realize what the situation was.

"You were right. I should have been more cautious about Ciel. Her Original Magic could perfectly replicate anything, so it's possible that she could have replicated the cocoon."

"What's going on? I don't understand what you mean." Edward was the only one still left out of the loop.

Even though he was the first to notice something was off, he still did not understand the severity of their blunder.

"A cocoon as massive as a universe would be more effective in drawing our attention—enough for us to neglect the real one." Kuzon sighed, holding his head in disappointment.

"Where could it have been? Behind? At the side? Or... don't tell me...!"

With widened eyes, Kuzon finally understood.

"Inside. The Cocoon was inside all along!"

"Inside what?" Edward asked, still slightly confused.

"Inside the massive cocoon. The real cocoon was most likely being protected by the massive one. So, when we destroyed the massive cocoon, the real one was still safe!"

It was just a theory, but Kuzon's gut feeling told him that was indeed the case.

"We got played. This was their plan all along!" He gritted his teeth, his eyes nearly producing liquid to show just how pained he was.

"It's our loss."

Ciel's acting had convinced them that she was desperate, but it was all to manipulate them and lower their guard of her.

They were so sure of their strategy that they fell for the grander scheme Legris cooked up.

"What now? Now that it has been separated from us, there's no way to reach the real cocoon." Serah groaned, also feeling the weight of disappointment on her.

It was at this point that the reality finally settled on the three of them.

"There's really... nothing we can do."

It was game over—and they were the losers.

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

Chapter 1278: Fight Against The Doppelgängers

[Meanwhile]

'Damnit... this is much more difficult than I thought!'

Ana's thoughts echoed as she glared at Maria's doppelgänger, the one she had been struggling to fight with for some time now.

The expressionless doppelgänger merely stared at her calmly, as if looking down on her in pity.

'It'll attack me soon. I have to think of something.'

The problem with Maria's doppelgänger was that it countered her own abilities.

'Cancer's Representation allows me to create anything of choice. It can take on the properties I ascribe to it as well. But...!' Gritting her teeth, she glared at the doppelgänger.

'... None of that matters when facing this one.'

Maria's doppelgänger had all the abilities Maria possessed—including the [Wish] Representation, which could simply counter her own power.

'When two equally powerful Representations clash, a null effect is established.'

That meant she couldn't get the copy with her Representation, but it also meant it couldn't affect her with [Wish].

'Thankfully that's the case...'

Unfortunately, it didn't change much in their clash—especially since there were other factors besides Constellation Representation.

'Maria still had her Original Magic, and I'm left sitting ducks!'

The only reason she had managed to survive this far was due to her strategy and superior battle prowess.

'Ciel didn't mimic our personalities, so that's a relief.'

Still, she was in a pickle.

'My offensive measures are countered, and my defense can be broken down if I'm hit since a clash with her Representation will nullify my armor's effects, leaving me vulnerable for her to strike.'

As a bead of sweat dripped down her face, she resolved to keep going.

'Just a little more...'

Maria was currently fighting her doppelgänger, and Ciel was watching them with a big smile on her face.

'Even if I manage to defeat the doppelgänger, there's still Ciel to worry about. I have to be careful about this...'

If her Representation wouldn't work, and conventional Magic was insufficient to take down her target, then Ana figured she had to think outside the box.

'Since I'm out of options, I might as well try that out on her as well...'

It would take some time, but Ana was confident she could continue evading attacks for a while longer.

'A-ah! Here she comes again! She's using Purple this time!' Ana's thoughts echoed as she stared at Maria's doppelgänger grabbing the purple blade from her floating arsenal.

She had memorized all the colors and their effects, and Purple was related to poison.

'She wants to slow me down or wear me out slowly, huh? Seems she wants to play the long game too.'

At this point, it was still uncertain who would emerge the victor.

However, one thing was for sure.

'I'm not going to lose to you!'

~SWOOOOOOOSSSHHH!!~

Maria rushed at Ana's doppelgänger, two blades in hand as she sliced through the air.

Within the fraction of a moment, she had closed the gap that the doppelgänger had created just earlier.

~VWUUUUUUUMMMM!!!~

The black blade on her right hand descended, its dark streak trailing down in a perfect arch.

Ana's doppelgänger, now cornered with no other path of escape, offered the only resistance she could give.

Generating her own blade, she slashed forward, hoping to counter Maria's black blade.

Unfortunately for the doppelgänger, her tricks weren't going to work this time.

'[Wish]'

Maria's utilization of Virgo's Wish—which was to completely eradicate the sword of her adversary—allowed her to at least nullify whatever effects it had.

As a result...

~CLANG!~

... The moment their blades collided, the sword of her adversary shattered into obscurity.

With her Black representing disintegration, everything that it touched would suffer the same fate.

With the sword out of the way, Maria pressed on, further strengthening her muscles as she brought the blade down with unyielding fervor.

~SWOOOOOOSHHH!!~

The glorious strike sliced through the dense armor that the adversary wore, ripping apart most of her arm—almost past the shoulder.

"G-gurk!" The doppelgänger groaned, now shifting back in recoil.

"You won't escape!" Maria yelled, now brandishing the second blade in her grasp.

It was White.

'I'll perfectly freeze her, and then hack her down with Black.'

It was the perfect way to ensure the adversary wouldn't squirm.

As the white blade shone in majesty, ready to send forth a burst of icy fog that would freeze anything in its path, Ana's doppelgänger did the impossible.

~SQUELCH!~

She sliced through her own body with a blade she summoned, and thrust herself away in order not to be caught in the ice blast.

"W-what?!"

While Maria was still recoiling from this, the doppelgänger remade her entire body—even the parts that Maria had disintegrated—thanks to her Representation of Creation.

'I was careless!' Her eyes widened in surprise as she observed the good-as-new opponent she now had to face.

'It's like what Cancer did for Master Serah and Kuzon.'

If she wasn't decisive enough, it would continue wasting her time like this.

'I was conserving my energy for after the fight, since I still have to deal with Ciel, but I can't keep going around in circles.'

The sooner she dealt with this doppelgänger, the better.

'Which is why...'

She released the two blades that were in her grip, allowing them to return to their spinning position around her.

With nine swords of different colors. She had a vast arsenal to choose from—or even all of them.

"[True Light: Final Array]."

The spinning blades around her suddenly vanished, now appearing around Ana's doppelgänger.

"...?!"

Even though the doppelgänger's face was well covered behind her helmet, Maria could tell that she was flustered.

"There's no escape!"

The spinning blades, now permanently encircled around Ana's doppelgänger, all shimmered in their respective colors.

"Burst." Maria declared.

And so, the combined effects of ice, fire, poison, disintegration, and all the other colors, merged into one glorious explosion.

... An eruption of true fireworks.

~KAAABOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOMMMMMM!!!~

The sparks that radiated all over the area were devastating, and the colors they displayed lit up the darkness of space.

Within seconds, the one known as Ana's doppelgänger had ceased to exist.

"Haaa... all done!" Maria sighed, though her gaze made it clear she wasn't done yet.

'Next is Ciel! Or should I first go and back up Ana?'

Right as she was having these thoughts, she noticed something in the distance.

Three silhouettes slowly approached her, floating in a straight line as they neared her.

'I-is that...?!'

Right there were Ana, Ciel, and Maria's doppelgänger!

'Were they able to defeat Ana? No... that can't be!' Maria's thoughts echoed.

It was probably another doppelgänger.

But that didn't make matters any better, did it? That meant the challenge was about to get more intense.

As Maria still deliberated on this, the three finally closed the gap, with only a small distance of a couple dozen meters.

"Stand back! I'll—!"

"Don't be so tense, Maria! It's me! I was able to beat Ciel and your doppelgänger!" Ana's response oozed with excitement as she yelled out everything.

"E-eh?"

Maria was confused, and rightfully so.

How was Ana able to defeat her doppelgänger and Ciel in such a brief period? It made more sense to think this was a trick.

However, it wasn't!

The Ana who was speaking was genuinely the real deal, and thanks to her plan... she had won flawlessly.

"Hehehe! Want to hear all about it?"

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

Chapter 1279: Absolute Hijack

It was a precarious moment.

Ana was in quite the pickle—fighting a more powerful adversary who was a terrible match-up for her, while also being concerned about the battle's aftermath.

There was no guarantee that Ciel couldn't make another duplicate, and even if she didn't, there was still a lot she didn't know about the crazy woman's abilities.

Ana had to find a way to win on both ends, despite how impossible it seemed.

'Alright then...!'

Fortunately, her strongest suit wasn't her Magic or Combat prowess... but her intellect.

And even in such a dangerous situation, all her gears were turning.

She knew exactly what to do.

"It's time." Ana smiled at her opponent once the fight had reached a crescendo.

At this point, she had run out of cards to play and escape points to utilize.

Ana's doppelganger was about to use all her blades in her Final Array, and Ana knew even she couldn't survive that.

However...

"Anabelle, initiate [Absolute Hijack] on the target."

Maria's doppelganger instantly froze up, her expressionless face becoming even more robotic.

This was just the beginning, though.

"Absolute Hijack complete. Anabelle is now in full control of this body." The doppelganger spoke.

It was her voice, and it was her body. However, it was clear that someone else had taken charge.

"Good job, Anabelle." Ana smiled as she drew close to the doppelganger, who had already disabled the blades.

"Up top!"

Both Ana and the doppelganger exchanged a high five, their palms slapping against each other in satisfaction.

... All of this to Ciel's disapproval.

"What's going on here? What are you doing?" Ciel's fierce words echoed.

She drew closer, her glare so deep that it leaked out pure bloodlust.

"What did you do to my creation?"

Ana remained calm despite the heavy pressure that Ciel leaked out, and Maria's doppelganger swiftly stepped to her front in order to defend her.

"Stay behind me, Master. I will protect you, no matter what!"

"Pfft!" Ana almost choked on her own laugh thanks to hearing those words from someone with both Maria's body and voice.

It felt hilarious to her.

"You are laughing? I asked a question and you are—!"

"Anabelle, initiate [Absolute Hijack] on the target." Ana interrupted Ciel, her voice as calm as ever.

And just like that, Ciel froze up and her expression turned robotic—same as the doppelganger.

She was no longer in control.

"Looks like the plan worked. How many percent is your bodily integrity now?" Ana smiled as she looked at her two new puppets.

"Accounting for the nano parts that are busy scouting the area, and the ones that have pervaded the bodies of both targets that have been hijacked, a total of 30 percent is left." A voice echoed from above.

"Undo [Perfect Unknowable] Cloaking and return."

Obedying Ana's instructions, a white sphere with two dots serving as eyes descended from above.

This was Anabelle, Ana's perfect Automaton.

"Excellent work, Anabelle. Looks like we were able to perfectly integrate your parts with respective targets, resulting in complete control."

It was no easy feat, but thanks to trial and error, they had reached this point.

"What are the chances of the Hijack being interrupted?" Ana asked.

"2.9 percent." Anabelle responded almost instantly, her tone being an almost perfect replication of her master's.

"Alright then. I suppose the breakdown of the chances consist mostly of external factors."

"Correct." Anabelle responded succinctly.

"Then there's nothing wrong with the Hijack. That's good to know."

It was a close one, and Ana knew fully well that she could have lost if a few more seconds were granted to the other party.

Thankfully, she was able to calculate all of these scenarios before they played out, finding out the estimated time needed for everything to take full effect.

"A time deficit of 2 seconds. Looks like I made a slight error. Thankfully, it was inconsequential." She sighed in relief.

'Next time, I have to calculate the exact time frame.'

With her thoughts settled and her opponents defeated, Ana thought it would be nice to surprise Maria since she figured the latter would be done with her opponent already.

"Alright, Anabelle! Let's go!"

"And that's how it happened." Ana concluded her explanation to Maria.

Throughout the whole thing, Maria had maintained her calm expression, though another thing was going on within her.

'This is insane. She did all that despite the conditions?!'

Her [Absolute Hijack] would not have worked if her targets knew of the nano parts that were being sneaked into them through respiration and other areas, since they could have destroyed them.

Ana, however, ensured they were undetectable and also durable enough to spread through every organ, blood vessel, and cell, until they were everywhere.

Once the nano parts became integrated with the neural links and the relevant parts of the body, all Ana needed was to give them the signal, and they would take over.

Which was exactly what she did.

"So... what now?" Maria asked.

They had fulfilled their task, and even managed to defeat Ciel. Practically speaking, their job was done.

"Well, the enemy is under my control now. I thought it would be safer to cause them to self-destruct, but since they can still be useful, I decided to keep them alive for now."

They were still unsure of the grand scale of things, so the best thing to do was have insurance.

"Let's rendezvous with Kuzon and the rest." Ana suggested.

"Shouldn't we help our other allies?" Maria asked in puzzlement.

"I don't think so. The main goal is to deal with the cocoon, so we have to confirm if the mission is going according to plan before resorting to anything else."

"Ah, I see..." Maria muttered.

"Besides, I have faith in everyone else."

Ana's bright smile radiated genuineness, her blue irises shimmering with pride.

"Don't you?"

After a brief moment of silence, Maria finally broke into a small smile and nodded.

"I suppose I do as well."

"Perfect! Now let's go meet up with the main team!"

"Are you sure it's not just because you want to see Kuzon?"

"W-what?! Of course not!" Ana's red cheeks told of a different story, even though she vehemently denied it.

"Sure..."

As both ladies joked and made their way to the trio who were meant to be their arrowhead, they were yet to know of the grim truth.

That they had already failed.

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

Chapter 1280: Ana's Theory

"W-what did you just say...?"

Ana and Maria were now standing in front of Kuzon, Edward, and Serah—with Ciel and Maria's clone trailing behind the former group.

Ana's eyes were currently twitching in surprise as she heard the explanation Kuzon and Serah gave about how they messed up the plan.

"So everything was for nothing...?"

Ana felt her heart racing as she stared at Kuzon's downtrodden expression.

She could tell that no one among them felt worse than he did. Even though no one officially acknowledged it, he had taken the role of their unofficial leader.

And yet... despite all of the things at stake, he messed up.

"We were tricked by Legris. It must have been his plan from the start, so there's no need to beat yourself up about it too much." Ana stated, causing Kuzon's body to tremble slightly.

Sure, she was trying to make him feel better, but Ana considered her words mostly stating facts.

Moping around and feeling self-pity wasn't going to miraculously change the situation.

"Yeah. Yeah, you're right." Kuzon sighed, covering a portion of his face with his hand.

"But we've tried everything. Before the two of you arrived, we tried all we could... but nothing worked. We can't access the world that has been pruned."

It was out of the reach of even Constellations.

"I see..." Ana muttered, rubbing her chin.

"We also tried to reach that point on our own, but stepping outside the Aether Realm means we are stripped of any form of protection. We would die before even getting anywhere close to the target."

Serah's words caused all attention to turn to her at this point. Even though she was sighing, it was clear that she was still trying to find alternatives.

Nothing just seemed to click.

"I understand the situation now. But I don't think it'll be a problem." Ana mumbled, rubbing her small chin as she spoke.

"You have a solution?!"

The entirety of the trio asked the question at the same time, and for a moment there was a spike in adrenaline.

Their desperation reached its peak as they all stared intensely at Ana.

"Somewhat. The plan is going to involve her, though." Ana pointed towards the docile Ciel who stood behind her.

"..."

For a moment, there was silence in the group.

Even though Ana had briefly explained that Ciel and Maria's doppelganger were under her control, it wasn't like she went into details.

It was unnecessary to do so, even at this point, but she could at least understand why they were giving such skeptical and unsure expressions.

"Relax. She's under my complete control. Besides, I don't see any other way to go about this."

If they wanted to win, they had to use their only cards available.

"How exactly do you want to use her to reach Legris' real cocoon?"

Ana smiled a little as she heard Edward's question.

"I often speculate on this theory, but after all that has happened—especially my talk with the Constellations—I could finally confirm it..." She began, folding her arms.

"... The nature of the Aether and Nether Trees."

Ana went on to explain what she meant.

"Both trees exist distinct from each other, and they do not exist in the same location. Hence, there has to be some distance between them, considering their different positions."

Since this was established, she went on.

"Using [The World] Arcana, it's possible to travel to one Realm from another. Traveling a certain distance through a gap that exists somewhere."

"What exactly are you driving at?" Serah asked impatiently,

Time was flying and she didn't want to drive around in circles.

"If the Nether Tree and Aether Tree are what make up all of existence, then what is that distance that needs to be traveled before we can reach either of them?" Ana asked, her smile broadening.

No one said anything for a while. Until...

"Nonexistence. The distance doesn't exist, but that in itself is a concept." Kuzon spoke.

His response elucidated a nod from Ana. However, he too wasn't done with his analysis.

"Nonexistence... that's the same thing as Legris, isn't it? He exists somewhere within that distance between the Aether and Nether Tree..."

"Precisely! Though it's useless to try to pinpoint his position at this point, we can speculate that this nonexistence as a concept is something that 'is', and if that's the case... then we can travel through it as well."

Even though her theory seemed to be outlandish, Ana felt very confident in it.

"In simple terms, just as we can use [The World] to travel through nonexistence and reach another Tree, we can use it to traverse what doesn't exist between us and the pruned world."

That was her plan dumbed down to its most basic form.

"But we don't have the Arcana... ahh..." Edward stopped himself from saying any more.

"Precisely." Ana chuckled a little, seeing that even Edward was already beginning to understand.

"That's where Ciel comes in. With her [Forge Of Creation], she can reproduce the Arcanas—including [The World]."

With that Arcana, they stood a chance of reaching Legris before it was too late, and ultimately defeat him.

"There's a possibility that Legris planned for this too." Kuzon murmured in hesitation.

However, he quickly pulled himself back up before anyone could respond to his despairing statement.

"If we operate under that assumption, we'll never get anything done. We just have to try our best no matter what."

Everyone nodded as soon as Kuzon uttered those words, and he turned to Ana to give her the most cheerful smile ever.

"Thank you, Ana."

"You can thank me later. Right now, let's try this out and hope it works." She smiled.

Kuzon's grin grew broader, and for a moment, the both of them were locked in a lover's daze.

Until—

"Need some help with that?" A voice echoed from far behind the group, causing everyone to look in the direction.

"You guys...!" Edward beamed with both surprise and relief as he watched the rest of their allies approach.

All of them were in perfect shape, and they were all smiling in resolution.

Jerry, Ciara, Beruel, Lemi, Aurora, and Aloe all stood before the rest of the group with resolute expressions decorating their features.

No doubt, they already knew about the failed plan.

But, no one spoke about that.

Everyone, as if speaking in unison, only had one thing to say.

"What can we do to help?"