

SPELLCRAFT 691

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

Chapter 691: Old Quarrel Buddies

"NO!"

My face was wrenched in painful pleading, and I was so sure I had done a good job at explaining the merits of having Beruel on board.

However—

"I'm not working with him. He shouldn't even be back here, you know?"

—It seemed I was wrong.

We were currently in Jane Ursula's territory—the special area we were using for, Soul Project: Omega.

"You really let him waltz in like this? You must have some deep trust in him... considering his affiliations with the Nether Cult." Jane slapped her hand on her face, as she shook her head in disbelief.

I could understand her point of view. I too had initially been sceptical about Beruel's change, and whether or not to trust him.

However, I realized I could.

'My hope is that she does too, but...'

Jane wasn't budging from her stiff position of wanting absolutely nothing to do with Beruel. I felt myself grow tired as I tried several times and failed to explain to her.

Ana and Beruel were waiting outside Jane's office—of course, they were restricted from touching anything in the tubes around.

I would have asked about the project's progress, but this matter came first. I needed to secure Jane's agreement to their joint cooperation.

"I'm honestly intrigued by this Ana girl. From all you've said, she seems skilled enough, for a human teenager. I can trust that you're not overrating her true skills, right?"

When it came to accepting Ana, Jane agreed without much need for convincing. It indeed showed that she needed the help.

However, Beruel was also an indispensable person that I needed for the new project I wanted to entrust in Jane's care.

'Soul Project: Omega, should be going fine, though they'll be able to help her with it. My main concern is the other work I want to bring to the table.'

It would be too much for Jane to accomplish alone. I really wanted her to accept Beruel's assistance.

And then, all of a sudden, I remembered something very very important.

"Beruel possesses an Arcana that's indispensable for this task. [The Chariot] allows him to manipulate technology—even intricate and micro ones that the eyes can't process. It would really save a lot of time and effort on your end if you choose to work with him."

I watched as Jane's face suddenly twitched. Her eyes reflected curiosity, as she placed her fingers under her chin.

While she blankly stared into space, I prayed that she would make the right call.

'Arcana or not; if she hates Beruel enough, she still won't agree.'

Unfortunately, this was something we needed to resolve. It was also a matter of priority for the Fairies.

'If the Nether Cult attacks, I'll need something on ground that can combat them on an equal footing.'

Having three experts cook up something amazing, per my instructions, would be perfect.

"You're going to have to donate more Automatons and Golems, you know." I nodded readily upon hearing Jane's voice.

My major concern was whether or not she had—

"Haaa... fine, I agree. Having an Arcana that can do that kind of stuff changes things. I'll tolerate him until this is all over, I suppose." Jane sighed.

I knew Beruel was infatuated with her, but I couldn't understand why. This Fairy hated his guts.

'At least they'll be a team.'

"Bring them in." She added, finally ready to meet her new recruits.

I could only hope for the best from this point onward.

Jane was upset.

Why?

She had been interrupted by Jared during a very critical moment in her 'side project.'

Yes, she knew it couldn't be helped, and after hearing Jared out, she could understand where he was coming from.

She agreed with him on the necessity of this new project he proposed. Unfortunately, he wasn't even going to help her with it.

Instead, he brought people to assist her—one of which was the vilest Fairy she had ever known.

Beruel, the previous Fairy King.

'He can't be serious, can he?'

She'd thought it had simply been a look-alike that walked into the project hall, but when Jared told her it was the real deal, she had nearly flipped.

Not only was she disappointed in Jared for trusting him so easily, but she was also very much upset with how insensitive he had been to just barge into her place of work with someone like that.

'He could have come alone and explained the situation to me first!'

It infuriated her to no end.

However, there was one silver lining that caused her not to flip completely. It was what Jared finally resorted to when trying to redeem Beruel.

'He has an Arcana... and it's the kind I need at the moment!'

Jane's thoughts went from being completely shut against the idea, to becoming a little open to a compromise.

The more she mulled it over, the more she realized that she could tolerate Beruel for a short while if it meant achieving her goals.

'I can solve my current predicament by making him help me with it unintentionally. That way, I won't need to spend even more time.'

And there was also Jared's project, which she still didn't know the full details about. He probably wasn't going to tell her until she agreed to bring Beruel on board.

Ultimately, she agreed.

It wasn't easy swallowing her pride, but she would do anything just to ensure the safety and success of her project.

"Bring them in."

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As expected, the heat in her chest rose to an enormous degree the moment she laid eyes on Beruel.

He, like her, was small in size. His wings, hair, and practically everything about his physique, were just as she remembered.

The only thing missing was the haughty expression he always flashed at her.

'Tch! This guy...'

Beruel entered her office with Ana, whom she was increasingly developing a good opinion of. The fact that Beruel praised Ana's efforts—and that she was the one that built Beruel's new body for him—made Jane genuinely curious of the little girl.

'If possible, I could also...'

 She smiled.

In any case, she just needed to endure being around Beruel while trying her hardest to use the lemons she had been given to make lemonade.

"Nice to meet you both, team members."

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Chapter 692: Project Proposal

I heaved a sigh of relief once the reintroduction of Ana and Beruel went relatively well.

Even though I spotted Jane glaring at Beruel more times than I could count, no incident occurred.

Ana seemed excited to be in the presence of Jane—a bit too excited, to be honest.

She was here to work, wasn't she?

'Well...'

I knew Jane would find Ana charming and incredibly useful once the work started, but my main worry was Beruel and Jane. Fortunately, I knew I could trust her with separating personal affairs from official matters.

"You don't need to be so apprehensive, Jane. I no longer have any interest in the Fairy Sanctuary. You can keep ruling it, if you desire."

Beruel's words were gentle, and his eyes were genuine. His sudden change really surprised me, if I was being honest.

I could only hope that it was the same for Jane.

"Whatever. Let's discuss the project. That's why we're together, right? Jared?"

'Ah, I suppose this was my queue.' I thought to myself, as I moved to stand in front of all three of them to present the in-depth analysis of my proposal.

"I want to mass produce weapons that can be wielded by our soldiers and the bulk of the military."

My encounter with Nether had shown me how useless Mana or Miasma was in its presence. Even if one could use it, the output would need to be crazily immense.

That would be a completely inefficient and unwise approach when fighting a war. When searching for an alternative, I finally found a solution.

"We'll use Aether as a base. With enough energy from the [Strength] Arcana, and with a technology capable of withstanding the output of Aether bursts, we can make even our base soldiers capable of fighting against Nether."

My major problem was that this was just a recent idea that I developed. In the absence of enough time to further develop the concept, as well as my occupation with other affairs, I couldn't build it up more than I had already done.

I needed all three of them to work on the concept and make it into a reality. To achieve that, however, they needed to work as a team.

"Aether is the main source of power for these weapons. That means we'll need lots of it." Jane spoke.

I nodded, summoning my Arcana in an instant.

The [Strength] Arcana can produce Aether, but it can also transform the Mana I inject into it and turn it into Aether.

As a result, we can't run out of juice as long as we have a functional source of Mana.

I was hoping for a way we could develop conduits in each weapon that ensured they could transform their Mana into Aether when utilizing it, but that was far too complex to be ventured into now.

We needed to focus on what could be achieved within the short period of time we had.

'Time slows down in this world place, but still...'

"It is satisfactory just to be able to mass produce weapons that utilize Aether as it's energy source. I'll give you a sample of what I'm talking about."

By showing them an enchanted jar filled to the brim with Aether, I was giving them something to work with. Furthermore, by properly using it as a sample, they would be able to achieve the desired results.

"How will we get the Aether fuel, though. We need to charge these, after all." Jane asked.

"Leave that to me. I'll prepare your fuel, or batteries, as they may be. I'll bring them to you at intervals, so you have a constant supply of Aether."

Just as Mana could be stored in Mana Crystals or Stones, I would be producing concentrated Aether.

"I can assume we have an accord, can't I?"

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'YESSSSSSS!!!' I gave myself a fist bump, as I flew out of the hall.

Not only did Jane agree to take on the project, but I could see the flames in her eyes—how excited she was to explore this new source of power.

Not just that, but I also got a new information on the Soul Project:Omega.

'Looks like it'll be right on schedule. You did a good job, Jane.'

Since they were already getting busy, I showed myself out. It would have been nice if I had someone to see me off, but I understood the situation.

'As long as the work is done...'

"Alright, listen here... there are a couple of ground rules that need to be laid out if we're going to be working together." Jane slammed her hand on her table, her hardened expression focused on her two new co-workers—or more like subordinates.

"First of all, this office is my space. No one is to disturb me when I'm in here. It's very critical for you to understand this, understood?"

Ana and Beruel nodded their heads, causing Jane to break into a relieved smile.

"Secondly, since we'll be working on a couple of things at once, it's gonna take a lot of our time and efforts. You all have to be as dedicated to this stuff as I am."

They nodded in agreement.

"If you have any other motivations, or perhaps a personal reason for this, let me know now."

Silence pervaded the room at this statement, and finally, Ana raised her hand to speak.

"Go on."

"I..." The young girl started, having a somewhat conflicted expression.

"... I plan on reviving someone I lost. Both his body and Soul are not available. But, I haven't given up. I hope that by working with you and learning more about Aether, I'll get closer to a means of resurrecting him."

Beruel instantly shot Ana a surprised look, his jaws completely hanging open.

However, a few seconds later, he raised his hand as well.

"What is it?" Jane nearly snapped at him.

"I promised to help Ana with her experiments, so if she's doing this for her dead boyfriend, I'm all for it too."

"H-he's not my—"

"Fair enough..." Beruel raised his hands in surrender before Ana could say more.

As Jane watched their exchange, especially Ana's determined gaze, she was reminded of herself in the past—how she had tried everything possible to resurrect someone she cared about too.

'Talking her out of it would be hypocritical and unfruitful...' Afterall, Jane remembered just how adamant she had been back when she lost Lewis Griffith.

'She'll eventually realize the futility of it.'

Miracles rarely happened—and unless her 'boyfriend' got Reincarnated, she had already lost him forever.

'Its quite unfortunate. But... I don't dislike her.' Jane smiled at Ana.

Something about the little girl resonated with her. Somehow, she knew within herself that they could work well together.

'Maybe even... haha, that would be interesting indeed.'

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Chapter 693: Dream Of The Forgotten

"Haaa..."

Neron's eyes looked open, even though they were closed.

It was late at night, and everyone was fast asleep—himself included. However, why were his eyes glowing green despite him being deeply asleep?

Why was he sweating buckets on his bed?

"Gh... ngh!" He grunted and groaned, twisting and turning on his bed.

There could only be one reason at this point... and it has to do with the dream he was having.

Or perhaps one could call it a nightmare...

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"Y-you killed all those people! They did nothing to deserve that!"

Neron was having a lucid dream.

He was aware of everything happening around him, and that nothing was real. Yet... he was watching these events play out like they were actually happening in reality.

He could see everything from the perfect angle, as he watched an exchange between two people. They were arguing.

The landscape was grey and dark, and everything looked blurry. Neron took in this scene with keen observation and a bit of confusion.

After all, this wasn't the first time he was having nightmares like these.

But why was this a nightmare?

'Serah...' His thoughts trailed as he watched the exchange.

A dark-haired man who resembled Neron was on one end, and a crimson-haired lady resembling Serah was on another end... and she was incredibly pissed.

"Everyone! You massacred an entire group people, Neron!" Her voice peaked.

Neron could feel his heart racing as he witnessed this exchange.

He tried to speak out, or at least reach out to Serah, but he was stuck as a spectator. Something just wouldn't let him budge.

"You wouldn't understand." The version of him in the dream retorted calmly, staring coldly at the agitated redhead.

"They were a threat. Besides, we tried to do this peacefully, but they didn't cooperate."

Serah, or rather the lady in the dream, appeared even more disgusted. Her surprise and appalled expression were heartbreaking to see.

"Besides, they killed Legris. That's more than enough." Once the cold and distant Neron said this, Serah's face could be seen scrunching up in shock, and then... sadness followed.

"Don't use your best friend's name as justification for such an act. Is this really what Legris would want? Besides, they were just defending their nation. Why would—"

"Like I said... you wouldn't understand!" Neron raised his voice, now looking even angrier and scarier than the annoyed woman.

His pitch black irises, as well as his tightly furrowed brows made it obvious that he was done with the conversation.

However, as it would happen, the crimson-haired lady was now shaking her head, stepping away from Neron.

She appeared horrified of what Neron was saying... what he was becoming. It seemed like she didn't even recognize him any longer.

In response, Neron sighed. His expression turned gentle, and his face softened. He slowly began to walk towards Serah, and after a few gentle steps, he was right in front of her.

"Don't get so worked up. Once I obtain all the Arcanas, we can resurrect Legris... and even those other guys." He smiled, attempting to place his hand on her shoulder.

However—

"Stay back!"

>BOOOOOOOOOOMMMMMM<

A fiery explosion caused Neron to fly backwards. He had a surprised expression on his face, and this gaze of his met her genuinely furious gaze.

"Serah, what are you—"

"You've changed so much, Neron..." Her energy began swelling, and her body slowly turned crimson.

Her fiery gaze never left his, and her power rose to an unprecedented degree.

Even the spectator—the dreaming Neron—recognized this form. It was Serah Crimson's Original Magic.

"... I don't know what changed you. Was it the power? All those things you experienced when you were away? Or maybe it's that group of yours!"

Serah was gritting her teeth at this point. Tears fell from her eyes, but they were instantly vaporized by her terrifyingly powerful form.

"Serah, what are you doing? You can't best me—"

"We haven't fought in a while. You're not the only one who has changed!"

"Well..."

"I'll be bringing you back... no matter what! This madness has to end."

"You expect me to abandon all of this? Then what would everything have been for? Legris' death, my whole years of adventure and study? Everything?!"

Serah's face morphed into rage as she seemed to be building the resolve to fight.

"I can't stop now! I'm so close... we're so close! Soon, I'll find what I'm looking for. A way to get to the hidden root. Maybe once I do that... You'll finally understand."

"I understand your reasons, but not your methods. You've gone too far in this pursuit. Is this what your father would have wanted?"

"Mordred is dead. The reason he's gone is because he wasn't willing to take the steps that I am willing to when it comes to seeking the truth about Magic."

"You... I know you don't mean that."

"Serah, I'm destined for greatness. I knew it since I was born. I've been gifted ever since I was little. Ever since I lived in the slums. Modred understood that, which is why he adopted me."

"Still... Neron..."

"This is what I am destined for! Everything that has happened was meant to lead to this moment. I'll uncover the truth and show the world... everything they're searching for. The whole point of Magic, and where it leads. That will end this madness."

"Is that all it boils down to? The fact that you don't like—"

"That's enough." Neron finally sighed.

His hair turned white, and white cackles of dense energy surrounded him. His expression was full of resolve—enough resolve to fight his childhood friend.

"Let's get this over with."

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"Haa... you've indeed grown strong, Serah."

The devastated scene around them was a testament to Neron's statement.

Of course, he had no scratch on his body, but his expression displayed a good amount of respect for the lady on the ground.

"Y-you... I'll never give up... on you..."

Serah Crimson was on the ground, completely worn out and defeated. Her tired eyes stared at Neron with compassion, but also determination.

"I wish I had [The Fool]. I would just erase your memories of all that has happened so far."

"Y-you—!!!"

"In any case, I'm leaving. You'd do well to stay away from me."

As Neron began to walk away, Serah grabbed him by the helm of his cloak. Her grip was tired and slipping, but she clung to him desperately.

However—

>VWUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUSSSSSSSHHHHHHH<

He still managed to escape her grasp. And in an instant, he flew off, sending dust and smoke flying about as he left the lone, injured woman all alone.

"N-Neron..." She whispered.

There was no one to hear her... except the dreamer of course.

He was right beside her. His vision became clouded as his eyes were filled with tears—tears and something akin to frustration.

Despite him watching the lady on the ground, his emotions were tied to the Neron of his dreams.

He could sympathize...no... understand the position of this dream's Neron. However, he also felt for Serah, whom he had brutally abandoned.

'Why...? I can't...'

This created a dissonance that seemed to tear him apart from the inside out.

"... Neron..."

"... NERON!"

He kept hearing Serah's voice, even when he covered his ears, and this continued until he felt his dream slowly blur out, as well as a stinging sensation on his body.

"NERON!!!"

An image of Serah flashed in his head, and suddenly, his dream faded completely. In return, he felt his consciousness returning back to present time.

"H-haaa...."

In a flash, he found himself awake from his sleep.

His sweaty body glistened in the darkness, and his widened eyes took some time before they adjusted to his surroundings.

"Neron! Can you hear me?! NERON!"

Someone was slapping his cheeks left and right—and that someone was Serah.

"A-ah, yeah... what is... what happened...?!"

He was surprised that his body was being touched. Did he forget to turn on his protective Spell?

Or...?!

However, before he could think of all that, Serah's worried expression was right in his face.

He could see her teary eyes and flustered look, and that pulled his wandering mind into the current situation

"Neron, what's going on! Are you alright?"

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Chapter 694: Tough Conversation

"Tell me what's going on with you, Neron... and I want the truth."

After Neron had calmed down, had a shower, and used Magic to clean up his sweat-drenched portion of the bed, he was now in a seated position.

Serah was seated on her side of the bed as well.

They were both facing each other, and while Serah's expression still connoted worry, Neron's calm expression showed that he was brooding.

"Your eyes were wide open and they were glowing. I felt your Mana being disturbed, and I could even touch you. You seemed to be in such distress. What's going on, Neron?"

The black-haired man understood the worry of his partner. He would probably have felt the same if their positions were reversed.

It was indeed very troubling—all the signs he showed—but after thinking about them for some time, Neron was slowly coming to a realization.

And he knew he could no longer hide it away from Serah.

>SHWUUSHH<

A card suddenly appeared as Neron stretched out his hand. It had a gleaming, blue and green color—a complete contrast to the usual grey appearance it usually exuded.

"I-isn't that..."

"Yes. [The Fool] Arcana." Neron sighed calmly. "It's deeply resonating with me."

"Could it be warping your mind? Causing all this distress? Maybe it's a negative effect that makes it dangerous. We should tell Jared, or—"

"No, it's not like that. You wouldn't understand—" Neron's eyes widened as he realized just what he had been about to say.

His tone, his expression, and even his words... they were a striking resemblance to the version of himself that he saw in his dream.

He almost blew Serah off, just like that other Neron.

"Are you alright?" He felt a warm sensation on his shoulder.

It was Serah's touch. Just the sensation of their their skin contact made him calm. His racing heart slowed down, and Neron felt more at ease.

'I'm not him. I'm not that guy!'

To prove that, he was going to tell Serah what troubled him. The things he had been hiding from her for so long.

"I have something to say, Serah. I'll understand if you get upset with me, but... I need to tell you."

Serah shook her head slightly, staring lovingly at Neron. Her eyes glimmered with such affection that he thought they looked magical.

"How could I be angry with you? Just spill the beans already."

Her soothing words provided him with comfort—enough for him to finally reveal what he had been hiding from her.

About his constant nightmares... and the reason behind his confession.

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"WHAAAAAAAATTTTTT?!"

Serah's eyes widened with shock, and they indicated anger.

"Now, now, calm down. Remember, you said you wouldn't get upset."

"I never promised not to get angry. I simply asked you how I could get upset." Serah's glare pierced Neron's eyes, causing him to gulp a little.

How could he escape this situation?

"Let's not make a fuss. It's night, so everyone is asleep."

"We used Magic to make this room soundproof, remember? After all..." Her eyes narrowed on him.

"Oh, yeah..." Neron suddenly remembered why they had been thoughtful enough to prevent any sounds from leaking out of their abode.

It wouldn't be nice for their companions to be disturbed so late at night by... the sounds they made at night—or practically any time they wanted.

"L-let's just calm down, Serah."

"So, you mean... you confessed to me because you had flashes of me dying and stuff? And the reason you want us to get married so soon is also as a result of that fear?"

"That's not how I said it, though." Neron tried his best to argue—albeit weakly.

"That's what you meant."

"Look, Serah. This doesn't change how I feel about you. I genuinely love you. I always have. It's just... I've always had this inclination to distance myself from you. That's why I refused to confess all these years." Neron's voice was sullen now, his gaze unfocused.

"I... I have always been led by some sort of intuition. It was this intuition that let me attend the Academy instead of going on adventures like I wanted. I became a teacher because of that too..."

Serah silently listened to Neron. She had never heard him talk about any of these things before.

"... My intuition told me to stay away from you. Even with my feelings, I couldn't accept yours. That would mean defying the strong warning within me."

"And you think these dreams are a cause of you defying your intuition?"

"No. I initially started having them as flashes—like memory flashes—and those were before I confessed to you."

Neron didn't know how to explain properly, but these flashes had been what prompted him to confess and get together with Serah.

"I just... I don't want to lose you."

In his nightmares, he usually saw Serah dead—or his life as another person. They were strange events he didn't recognize, yet they seemed so real.

Almost like memories.

"But, what role does [The Fool] have in all this? It has to do with memories, right? So, are you saying I'm supposed to be dead?"

"No, I don't think so. I'm not sure too. It's all too confusing. The 'me' I see in these dreams don't resemble any 'me' that I know of."

"Then... could this be a future incident?"

"Maybe. But... I still have this inclination that it could be something more." Neron felt confused.

It was an emotion he wasn't quite used to.

For most of his life, he had felt certain on what path to take. His intuition never failed him. Perhaps that was why he had become bored at some point.

However, this was too much.

"Perhaps we should tell Jared. If the both of you rub minds together, then—"

"No. I can't..."

Serah's eyes twitched when he said this. Neron's gaze was distracted, but he seemed pretty certain about this one.

He truly didn't want Jared's involvement.

"Your intuition?" She asked, to which he nodded.

"Alright. I trust you."

"I'm sorry for keeping all of this from you, Serah. I understand if you feel hurt, but... like I said... I truly and genuinely care about you. I love yo—"

Before Neron could conclude his statement, he was stopped by a finger on his lips. Serah's finger, to be precise.

"I got it." Serah was smiling at this point.

Her confidence was amazing, and her menacing expression made Neron's heart race in excitement.

"I don't care what dreams you have, and what your visions say. I'm not going to die, and you're not going to go to the dark side."

"But... what if I do?" Neron asked, a worried expression forming on his face.

"Then I'll knock you out of your delusion and drag you back with me!" She laughed, flexing her muscles.

Neron's eyes widened instantly. He was shocked—no, appalled—by the striking resemblance Serah had to the one in his dreams.

Their resemblance was uncanny.

"Don't worry, Neron. We're in this together, alright?"

Serah's voice pulled him out of his daze once again, and her fist was right in front of his face.

He instantly knew what she was going for.

"Yeah. You're right." Neron returned her grin, giving her an instant fist-bump.

"Haha! That's the spirit. You better get some sleep, though. Rough training begins today!"

Neron nodded.

"Will you be fine? I'll watch over you to make sure you're not in a nightmare again—" Before Serah could finish her statement, she felt Neron's hand on her cheeks, and his soft smile warmed her worried heart.

"Don't worry, Serah. With everything we've discussed tonight... I doubt I'll have any nightmares."

Both of them stared at each other passionately, and a sort of mutual understanding was established.

Their hearts became one at that moment, and they hugged each other, cuddling as they fell asleep once more.

And, what a peaceful night it was.

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Chapter 695: Moonlit Discourse [Pt 1]

The stars spread far across the darkness of the night.

A cold gust of wind blew, sending a mellow chill across the bare plains that was established as the team's base.

The night's moon was hung high up in the sky, and the small—yet brilliant—glows of the stars spread their light upon the world.

Everyone was fast asleep, preparing for the day of training that would commence very soon, unable to witness just how glorious the night looked.

Everyone except one.

"Haa..." I heaved a sigh as I looked above me.

A lot was going through my mind—so much so that I could do nothing but sit still while watching the world from my position.

Sleep eluded me, and my body was too full of energy to fall into slumber.

'Rest is important.' I thought to myself, but deep down I knew that wasn't going to happen anytime soon.

I was troubled, after all.

The Nether Cult frightened me, in all honesty. There was something about the group... about this mission... that seemed to send shivers down my spine.

Underneath all the bravado and all of the planning, I had a sense of foreboding within me.

And that scared me plenty.

"And there's also the issue of the team..."

I was in some sort of uncertain area at the moment, as regards to their trust. The most obvious gulf existed between me and Ana... and our last encounter didn't show any signs of things getting better.

The silent treatment she gave me, and the dissatisfaction I sensed from her... they all proved one thing—that she was still upset.

'I can't make this all about me. I know she's still mourning Kuzon's death, and she can't exactly be the same as she was. But...'

She had spoken to everyone else after that incident. Everyone but me.

Aloe Vida was also acting strange.

'No one is raising the issue of my Reincarnation. I guess they want to focus on the mission first...'

I understood things from that aspect. However, I still felt uneasy.

Perhaps sitting and watching the night, all alone, caused me to go too deep into my thoughts.

'Who knows...?'

"What's wrong, Jared?" A voice suddenly echoed in my ears, causing me to swiftly turn in the direction of the sound.

I was so lost in thought that I hadn't even perceived the presence of someone else in the vicinity... not until she spoke.

"A-ah, Maria..." I stuttered, my eyes meeting hers.

Underneath the allure of the night, Maria's sudden appearance had a certain charm to it. Her silver hair seemed to gleam brightly, and her blue eyes glowed like gems.

I was so captivated that words failed me.

"Jared... are you okay?" Once she said those words, I finally snapped from my gawking state.

"Y-yeah. I am." I nodded, looking away as I raised my head to once again admire the canopy of bright darkness above my head.

Maria drew closer, and I could hear her gentle footsteps. It didn't take long before she sat right beside me, her hair tickling my face slightly.

"Hey, talk to me. What's the matter?" She nudged me—both with her words, and with her shoulder against mine.

"Haha... well..."

What could I really say? How was I supposed to begin? I was the leader. The one with the plan, as well as the certainty, that would guarantee our victory.

Yet... why was I suddenly so unsure about everything? This moment of weakness felt so crippling that I didn't want to reveal it to anyone else—especially not to Maria.

However—

"I'm scared, Maria."

—I didn't even know when I started to speak.

"Scared about what?" Her melodious voice rang in my ears, causing me to divulge even more.

"This mission. Everything that has been happening. I have a bad feeling."

Silence took reign for a moment. Maria was probably speechless by my words, but I had to give it more context.

"The Nether Cult has existed for so long, Maria. Its members are not only powerful, but they're also experienced. They have brilliant people like Legris on their team, and their First Seat can devastate an entire nation with one strike. I'm not saying those things in themselves are scary, but..."

How could I explain this in words? How could I really translate my suspicion into speech? It eluded me greatly.

"They're currently weakened, I understand that well. We also have the advantage and everything seems ideal.. However, why do I feel so hesitant now? My true identity being revealed has caused a major crack in the team, but I fear that many more might appear. I... I just..."

Maria's hand touched my shoulder, causing a wave of warm sensation to course through my body.

'Her hand is cold.' My mind thought.

"Should we postpone the mission?"

"No. That's the worst part, I can't do that. The longer we take, the worse it'll be. It's best we act fast. The moment the team gets the hang of the Arcanas, and we've attained the desirable level of power for this mission, we have to strike fast."

If we were to take our time, the chances of being struck unprepared was very high.

"And that's what scares me. It's the fact that we have no other choice but to attack now, yet I'm nervous about it. It's like we're stuck in a situation where this is our only chance."

I felt like I was being played once again. If anything, this could be one of Legris' plans.

'If I choose to use this perfect opportunity, it could be a trap. However, if I refuse, they'll cause more damage.'

Either way... I felt like a predetermined outcome existed.

"If the First Seat alone should strike... he can wreak havoc on an entire nation in seconds. The Soul Project: Omega, can only handle so much. I can't possibly withstand the deaths of many people possessing my Soul Brand, and we lack enough facilities and time to revive them—not to talk of energy."

I could see risk after risk.

The best means was to spearhead a team to go all-out on the enemy and cause whatever damage we could on their territory.

"And we only have one shot."

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

Chapter 696: Moonlit Discourse [Pt 2]

I wasn't looking at Maria. I didn't know what kind of expression she would have, and I was somewhat nervous about it.

"Jared. If this is the best route to take... then take it."

"I know that, but—"

"You're worried that you won't be able to save everyone. You're frightened about the effects of your actions. You fear the enemy might use this against you." Maria was spot-on.

I nodded at her every word.

"But... the thing is... it's the only option that guarantees the best results. If you feel inadequate, then train more or create a better countermeasure against whatever the enemy might utilize against the current plan."

I understood her answer, but—

"Jared."

>WHAP!<

Both of her hands smacked my cheeks, and before I knew it, they were turning my face in her direction, and I found myself looking into her eyes.

It was... beautiful.

"Jared, I know you want to win. I know you'll do whatever you can to secure the best results. I know you'll think of every possible solution."

Her glimmering blue eyes sent fireworks coursing through my body. I couldn't explain it, even if I tried.

"But you have done all of those already. If this is what you've chosen, then forget about the other plans. Make a choice and stick to it. Come what may, you'll know you did everything you possibly could."

Her answer was simplistic, but something about her words resonated within my heart. Was she right? Was she wrong?

I had no idea.

However...

"Everyone believes in you, Jared. We wouldn't be here if it weren't for that fact. Even Ana does. Why else would she agree with your plan to send her to Jane?"

'She... does?!'

"The Allied Nations rely on your judgement. I know that makes you feel more worried about what will happen if you end up being wrong, but... it simply shows how none of them could do a better job."

"A-ah..." I was left speechless.

"I'm not trying to appeal to your ego, Jared. And I'm not trying to make you feel better. I'm just being as realistic as I can. Everyone follows your plan partly because they trust you, but it's also because they can't do any better."

My eyes widened even more.

"Even if the plan fails and we lose... why would they blame you for something they couldn't do any better in?"

Something within me instantly sparked, and my memories returned to the time when I was revealed to be inept in my first life.

When I returned to my town and lashed out at everyone as a result of my insecurities. How I raised my voice in fear of the mockery that was bound to come as a result of my humiliating failure.

However—

"Well, it was a shame you didn't end up being the genius magic user you proclaimed you would become... but, why would we make fun of you for not achieving something we couldn't either?"

—The words they responded to me with, were enough to shatter my preconceived expectations

"A-ah... So that's it."

Perhaps I was overthinking too much. Was I being overly worried, shackling myself with expectations and consequences that simply weren't present?

Perhaps that was it.

"Thank you, Maria." I suddenly broke into a smile, staring at her usual expressionless face.

Something about the girl's clear outlook made me appreciate her company.

"It's nothing, really." She shrugged.

Even with her words, I found myself unable to look away. It was the same for her, apparently.

The both of us just kept staring at each other, unmoving.

Why?

Why couldn't I move?

I simply couldn't help but remain stationary as my heart raced with unexpected urges, and the heat within slowly burned brighter.

'I... what do I...'

Suddenly, I found myself moving.

My body slowly tilted forward, moving in the direction of the girl in front of me. I couldn't explain it—or perhaps I could.

Something about her clear eyes, her glossy lips, and her alluring presence kept me moving forward.

I was lost... too lost in the moment... to show any form of restraint any longer.

"Maria..." I whispered, my face now mere inches from hers.

"... Thank you."

And then, it happened.

I kissed Maria.

For the very first time... I kissed her. My lips touched hers, and I felt the succulent softness of her tongue on mine.

It was awkward, considering I had been the one to initiate this moment, but... it wasn't so bad either. Our hands touched, and I could feel the comfort in the chill of her skin. It contrasted my body's heat.

'Truly, Maria... thank you.'

As our fingers intertwined with one another, so did our lips. I had no idea for how long, but we were lost in ecstasy, under the night's watch.

"Well, isn't this interesting..." A voice echoed within an incomprehensibly vast room.

The room had a huge table, with six seats on the right side, and another six on the left side.

The forefront had a throne-like seat, and the entire structure demonstrated order.

The room was exquisite, its walls painted with murals, and the chandeliers, alongside the tiles, drapes, and carpets. depicted luxury.

This was the headquarters of the Nether Cult, and the man who just spoke was their leader.

He was seated on his superior chair, and before him were the cult's remaining members, who were a measly number of four.

The First Seat, the Third Seat, the Fifth Seat, and the Sixth Seat.

Other than the four, the other members were absent—most of them already dead.

"Beruel switched sides, while the others are dead. It's amazing how our numbers dropped so swiftly. Even Kido is..." Karlia, the Succubus glanced to her side and was met with an empty chair.

"Miss him already?" A teasing tone rang from Legris Damien of the Sixth Seat.

He had a stupid grin on his face that made light of the situation, a sharp contrast to the younger boy who sat beside him.

"Shut up." The crimson-toned Demon replied, gritting her teeth in disgust.

Her current apparel was that of a lab coat, and she had glasses on. It was clear she had been in the middle of a certain scientific procedure before the start of the meeting.

The First Seat was silent, simply waiting for their leader to divulge whatever information he wanted to.

As for the Fifth Seat... his expression was grave.

"We now have a total of six people left at the helm of our organization. Four Seats, along with her and myself." The Cult Leader glanced at the female subordinate beside him for a moment, before returning his focus to everyone else.

"We should start the meeting now."

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

Chapter 697: The Cult's Fellowship [Pt 1]

"As expected, the Singularity proved to be a major threat. Not only have we been placed in such a disadvantageous situation with the Arcanas, but we've also lost two of our Upper Seat members. This has never happened before."

The person speaking was Karlia, and the expression she had wasn't very friendly. Anger and frustration filled her face, and a little wrinkle of worry appeared as well.

"We should have focused our attention on getting rid of him first... then focused on the Arcanas, later on. Right now, the job has become more tedious." She sighed.

Silence followed her words. The other Seat members stared at Karlia, and then at their leader. The former had raised a valid point, and they awaited their leader's response.

"Does anyone else have something to say?" His voice echoed through the vast hall, sending chills throughout the room.

In response, no one spoke.

"Karlia, your point is valid. It does seem more useful to get rid of the Singularity. However, it's much more difficult than you can imagine."

"That was when we had been operating in secret. Now that our identity has been revealed to the public, there's nothing wrong with sending one of the Upper Seats to get rid of him. Heck, the First Seat could get the job done. No offence." She swiftly added, bowing gently to the silent man.

In response, he smiled softly and nodded.

Karlia always held the man in high regard, and his cool response always made her glad that he was one of her coworkers. Unlike that pervert, Kido, he didn't blab all day. He respected boundaries, and he had this mysterious and secretive vibe surrounding his goals—making them seem profound.

To be honest, she thought he was cool.

"If we had just gotten rid of that Jared fellow, and also Neron, then we wouldn't have become sitting ducks. Is it just me, or have we been postponing their demise for too long?" Karlia mentioned, staring at everyone in the room.

"I have to agree with Karlia on this point. I have fought with Jared, and he definitely isn't strong enough to pose a threat to everyone here. We should have gotten rid of him earlier." Stefan mentioned.

"Oh? And what makes you so sure that he wasn't holding back when fighting you?" Legris added with a snicker.

"I was holding back plenty."

"Then why didn't you kill him?"

"It wasn't in the plan. If I had been given orders to, I would have killed him. What about you? Why didn't you kill Jared?"

"Well... let's leave it at that."

Legris and Stefan glared at each other, although, most of the animosity came from Stefan. Legris mostly gave a defiant grin that only served to annoy the young boy even more.

"Welp. I guess the Cult Leader will explain why we've been so passive. Right, leader?" The Sixth Seat grinned sheepishly at their overarching commander.

He was seated silently, watching everyone's interactions. Patience was a virtue, and the young leader had plenty to spare. He simply watched his members tire themselves out from their arguments. Until finally...

... The hall became completely silent.

"It seems you are all done. Then, I shall explain." His voice was like a mist, shrouding the area in its soothing and chilly tone.

At this point, all four seats gave him their focus, and the maiden beside him broke into a wide smile. She also smiled at her master with devotion—awaiting his words of wisdom.

"We've spent years, and only managed to gather a couple of Arcanas in the process. However, in such a short span, everything has been found and accounted for. It's amazing, isn't it?"

"Yeah. It just sucks that they are with the enemy."

"I wasn't done, though." The Cult Leader shot Karlia a sharp gaze, causing her to instantly realize how imperative it was for her to shut up. "The Arcanas are with Jared's team. However, that is almost inconsequential to me."

The Cult Members all shifted in their seats a little. They didn't want to interrupt the leader, but something about his statement didn't resonate well with them.

In the first place, the only reason they were in the Nether Cult was because of their desire for all the Arcanas. Surely, the leader knew this. Why would the possession of such objects of power not matter to him?

"I desire the completion of the set as much as all of you. However, there really is no reason to get too worked up over this development. In the end, victory is ours... that is something I can absolutely guarantee." The Cult Leader grinned.

He hardly ever displayed any emotion, so everyone was amazed to see the height of his confidence in their group's victory.

"Their team will most likely be coming here to exterminate our group. If we intercept them and play our cards right, we should be able to win. Cards... see what I did there? Hahaha!" Legris chuckled, causing the young boy beside him to groan while slapping his forehead.

Sometimes, one had to respect Legris' genius mind. However, that impression was always undermined by his acts of stupidity. One could never tell if he was doing these things on purpose at this point.

"With Kido gone, I guess we have a new comedian in our group." The Cult Leader's grin widened.

"A-ah... hahaha. You're welcome...?" Legris let out an awkward laugh, before finally deciding to shut up completely.

"In any case, I'll need to be clear with everyone here. The plan will indeed succeed. Your wishes will be realized as soon as the Arcanas converge. And they will do so in one week's time—give or take."

"Why that time in particular?" Karlia asked, raising her brows in curiosity.

Silence bled into the room, and expectant eyes greeted the Cult Leader once more. However, a being of his calibre was capable of providing an answer in no time.

"Just a hunch."

"Is that so? Alright then. I'll stick with you and the group. As long as I get what I want." Karlia shrugged.

"Well, you are the new Second Seat, so... And anyway, the role doesn't really matter now that the climax is upon us. Still, your wishes will be actualized, and all of your desires will be fulfilled."

That statement seemed to please everyone. Thus, the leader was able to finally address the issue he wished to discuss.

"The opposition most definitely has a plan for the impending clash. As an organized group, we should do the same..." His eyes gleamed, hints of excitement and mischief swirling deep within.

"... Don't you think?"

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Chapter 698: The Cult's Fellowship [Pt 2]

"Let's start with you, Stefan Netherlore. You'll be AWOL during the attack." The Cult Leader stated, glancing in the direction of the young teenager who seemed to be younger than him by only a year or two.

"W-what? I won't be around? But—"

"I understand your desire to have a rematch with Jared Leonard, but you already had your fun. Your responsibilities to the Cult come first. Don't you agree?"

Stefan gulped upon seeing how the leader's gaze narrowed at him, forcing him to nod his head in defeat.

"You'll be in charge of attacking the allied nations. Use the resources at your disposal properly—the Nether Beasts and the Corrupted." Their Leader added.

"U-understood."

Stefan's face was dark with annoyance, but he was too powerless to resist orders from his superior.

'Damnit! I wanted to be the one to face Jared this time around. I wanted to defeat him fair and square!' What was the point of his big reveal to Jared, and displaying a fragment of his power to the boy?

It was all to build the situation up to an epic climax where he would finally assert his superiority over Jared and prove himself peerless among everyone his age. However, all of that suddenly seemed to go down the drain.

'How frustrating!'

"Hey, don't look so glum, Stefan. You're attacking the allied nations, right? Things are bound to get very interesting." Legris patted him on his shoulder, eliciting an immediate reaction from Stefan.

"Take your hands off... now!" An ominous glare filled his face, depicting nothing short of pure animosity.

"Whoah! Relax. I'm just saying... Maria Helmsworth is bound to remain in the Eastern Kingdom. Don't you have a score to settle with her too?"

"How are you so certain about that?"

"I know Jared's personality well. He won't let Maria or Ana invade somewhere as dangerous as here." Legris smiled, as he slowly removed his hand from Stefan's shoulder.

The young boy didn't seem to be in such a foul mood anymore. Rather, he appeared to be in deep thought—ruminating well on his options.

"I see. Well, if it's Maria... I can manage. But, will she be as strong as I hope?" A smile began to break out on Stefan's face.

'I also think Jared won't let the weaker ones come here. He'll leave Maria, Ana, and a few other members behind because of that. But if I tell Stefan that, he won't be satisfied with fighting Maria. It's better this way.' Legris shrugged at Stefan's words, hiding his thoughts.

"Who knows? But I doubt she would be weak. I mean... she's a genius, right?" Of course, this statement sparked greater interest in the Netherlore boy, making him more eager to engage in his mission.

"Very well. I suppose this is enough to appease me, for now. I should also be able to face interesting opponents from other nations. This should be fun."

The Cult members were amazed by how Stefan's disposition took a big turn simply because of Legris Damien's persuasive words

'He's incredible.' Thought Karlia as she subtly glanced in the man's direction. 'Yet he's pretending to be incompetent. How interesting...'

With Stefan's job settled, the Cult Leader proceeded to state the tasks assigned to the rest of them—or rather, he intended to. However...

"About Neron Kaelid... is it alright if I take care of him?"

Everyone was, once again, struck by surprise when the most unexpected proposal came from the most unexpected individual.

Legris Damien, the most underqualified member of their group, was asking to be allowed to deal with the most dangerous person recognized by the Nether Cult.

Of course, the Cult Leader and his maiden maintained a neutral stance—no, the lady in white even smiled a little.

"Why? I thought you were more interested in Jared Leonard?" The Leader's voice boomed, containing a tinge of amusement.

He wasn't the only curious one.

Legris had always appeared to be very lax and not particularly strong. Sure, he was intelligent and cunning—but that should have told him how much of a stretch it would be for someone of his calibre to 'take care' of Neron.

Besides, when did Legris become as ambitious as to demand prey from the Cult Leader himself?

This sudden switch in his personality made everyone amazed; some were amused, while others were unsurprised.

"Jared is interesting, but... not as much as Neron. We have a history together, so... I just thought it would be fitting."

"History? As in fellow lecturers at Ainzlark? I don't think that kind of history is enough to generate such an interest." Stefan commented.

Everyone's eyes were now on Legris, awaiting his response—or rather, the justification he would give for his unwarranted and sudden interest in Neron.

"I mean, I've known him for so long. He probably doesn't remember, but we were quite close before."

"I was unaware of this." The Cult Leader mentioned.

"Hahaha. Well, it's just in my head. You don't need to take me seriously." Legris burst out laughing, causing the members to either shake their heads in disappointment or even smack themselves in the face for thinking—for even a second—that Legris was about to make a valid point.

"I just... want to have a go at him. What do you say, leader? Pretty please?" Legris clasped his hands together and made his best puppy-eyes impression.

It was honestly a pretty good try... if it hadn't been for his stupidly mature face which ruined the expression completely.

"You haven't given me a valid reason for this, so... well... fine, then... Legris, you'll take care of Neron Kaelid."

"WHAT?!" Stefan and Karlia expressed shock at the same time.

They had all expected the Cult Leader to instantly shoot Legris down, request be damned. This development was utterly unexpected!

"Do not fool around, Legris. Neron is dangerous." The Cult Leader ignored everyone's objection and focused his attention on the rejoicing Legris Damien.

"Understood. I'll give it my all."

"It's settled, then. Legris will handle Neron, while Stefan takes care of the Allied Nations. As for the two of you..." The Cult Leader completely settled the topic and moved on as naturally as possible.

It was such a bizarre development that the people present in the room had to express surprise. However, the First Seat simply nodded calmly, the maiden in white smiled broadly, and the Cult Leader was simply indifferent.

Everyone simply had to take it as it was.

"First Seat and Second Seat... you'll be in charge of eliminating all the trespassers. Prevent them from advancing any further. Leave no one alive."

"Yeah... sure." Karlia sighed.

It felt surprising that the lower-end members were left with such burdening responsibilities while the most powerful were relegated to cleanup duties. Then again, eliminating the main team of invaders was the most vital aspect of this mission.

As Karlia digested the task she had to accomplish, a hand was raised beside her. It immediately caught her attention—as well as the attention of everyone else in the massive hall.

"I would like to make a selfish request." The First Seat spoke in his calm tone.

His unfazed expression, stern and strong, caught everyone's notice. His unwavering gaze and humble persona were one of the things that gave him the honour he currently had, and his simple personality could not be despised.

"What is the matter?" The Cult Leader's tone was just as respectful.

"I would like to be left in charge of exterminating all the invaders." This bold statement roused the attention of everyone.

The bulk of the opposition's force—determined to completely obliterate the Nether Cult—being intercepted by only one member sounded absurd. However, everything made sense once everyone allowed it to settle in that the First Seat was the one in question here.

Everyone knew he was impossibly strong. Nevertheless...

"Any reason in particular?"

"I desire a challenge. The prospect of their strength is high, so I'm interested. Besides, they shouldn't pose too much of a threat to me. If they do, I'll be sure to call for backup."

"Hmmm..."

"I mean, I don't mind. It gives me more time to do my research, so I'm in support of the First Seat fighting all of them." Karlia added.

No one particularly doubted the strength of their strongest member. Nonetheless, the decision was up to the Cult Leader, wasn't it?

"Very well. Karlia, remain on standby, just in case..."

"Understood."

"As for the First Seat... I will leave them to you."

"I greatly appreciate it." The Martial Blade God bowed his head in response.

"Since your roles have been settled, all we can do is wait for the presence of our opposition." The Cult Leader gave an undaunted smile, and his expression was shared by all who were present.

The Martial Blade God.

Karlia, the Succubus.

Stefan Netherlore

Legris Damien

And even the maiden in white.

They all smiled fearlessly because they knew the end result of the imminent confrontation. It was plain as day to them.

"Jared Leonard and his allies... will only come here to die."

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

Chapter 699: Start Of Operation [Pt 1]

[One Week Later]

The sun peeked from the horizon, steadily rising in the advent of dawn.

The grassy fields danced, and the refreshing wind spread far and wide, sending waves of both chilled and soothing aromas to the inhabitants of the land.

"Haa... we actually made it in time." A voice stated.

Its tone sounded relieved, and something about it felt free-spirited.

The plains had quite a few inhabitants, all of whom were smiling at this point. They couldn't help but agree with the blonde who just spoke.

"I didn't think we'd make the cut at some point, but would you look at this?" The voice belonged to Jared, and he was smiling at the team members that were gathered before him.

They all returned his gaze and expressions with similar ones. Relieved looks spread across their faces, and their eyes bloomed with excitement.

"How many years did we spend?" One asked.

"Maybe three? Four?"

"Five years. We spent five years." The black-haired gentleman named Neron answered. "I increased the ratio, so we'd have more time."

After five years of rigorous training, all of their preparations had been for this very day—this single mission.

"I am proud to announce that your training is over. And now..." Jared declared with both arms crossed, as he proudly stared at each person's face.

Neron Kaelid

Serah Crimson

Lemi Vindiel

Ciara Epilson

Aloe Vida

Edward Carl Leon

Maria Helmsworth

Elrich Lendertwale

Ivan Smith

Jerry Keller

Asa

Maro Smith

"... We begin the mission."

Ana and Beruel didn't train with us, since they were busy helping Jane with the new project—one I hoped was in its finishing stages.

'Should I check up on her again?'

The last time I did so, she told me not to bother her about the details, and that it would be ready in time. Wasn't it better to simply put my trust in her words?

"I've supplied them with enough Aether. All that's left is for them to exercise competence on their end." Jane had never failed me before, so I wasn't doubting her skills.

With brilliant people like Beruel and Ana with her, I was even more confident. With that already established in my mind, I decided to focus on other things.

'One week transformed into five years... Neron really is amazing.'

Back when I trained for a century, three years elapsed in the normal world. Compared to my limited control over the time ratio, Neron did an outstanding job.

Thanks to that, my team members had reached an adequate level of power—one where I considered their past selves pale in comparison.

'This should be enough. I really hope it is...' I shook off all pessimistic thoughts and decided to move on to the next phase of the plan.

"Alright, guys. It's time to teleport you to your assigned zones."

Ivan and Jerry were going to the land of the Elves; Asa and Maro would be with the Dwarves; Maria and Elrich were to remain in the Eastern Kingdom.

They didn't need my help getting back to the capital, considering Elrich's mastery of [The Tower].

'He really is a genius and an expert at Magic Items. He even achieved a higher proficiency than me with [The Tower].'

I utilized my Spell Cards and sent the respective people to their designated locations. Since I had already spoken to the Allied Nations beforehand, there wasn't any problem with sending them directly to their destinations.

It was efficient, even.

Within moments, everyone had gone to their assigned spots—except Elrich and Maria, of course.

"You guys will be stationed at the Capital, yeah?"

"Indeed. Though, I'll have the Automatons stationed at every possible area of the Kingdom. The denizens have also been evacuated, and I'll make sure to transport them to the pocket dimension using [The Tower]. No one will get hurt."

I nodded at Elrich, happy that he knew exactly what to do. Then again, he was a Grand Mage—the personification of my childhood dream.

'All the citizens are currently as close to the capital as possible. Since they're all in one place, it'll make it easier for him to keep them in his pocket dimension.'

[The Tower] was useful for many things, and having a very vast—nigh infinite—alternate space was one of its perks.

"I'll also spread out my senses. Nothing will escape my perception."

I smiled, nodding at Maria's diligent tone. Her face was the same as usual, but I saw the flames of conviction in her eyes.

It really was amazing how much she had grown in one week—well, five years.

'[The Pope] will suit her well.'

'Be careful, Maria. Fall back if it gets too difficult,' is what I wanted to say to her, but that would only be an insult to her conviction.

It wasn't like I would allow anyone to dissuade me from my own mission, so the same could be said for her as well.

Maria was doing this because it was in the plan... and for that, I had to admire her grit.

"Thank you, Maria." I eventually said.

We stared at each other for a long second, and then our faces drew nearer as we shared a brief kiss.

It felt good.

"I'll be back as soon as I'm done." A smile formed on my face

"You had better." She returned my grin.

Once again, we stared at each other. I felt like kissing her some more, not even caring about the numerous stares we were getting.

However—

"A-ahem! Jared... tick tock." Elrich murmured, feigning a cough before making his statement.

"Ah, that's right. Sorry to keep you waiting." I let out awkwardly.

It wouldn't do if I—the designated leader—was the cause of some sort of delay in the plan.

"W-well, then... goodbye."

"See you soon."

With meaningful nods and smiles on our faces, we parted ways.

Elrich created the portal that sucked them in; sending them to their proposed designation, no doubt.

"Well, there's that." A smile remained on my face as I stared at the people who were left.

"Neron. Serah. Ciara. Lemi. Aloe. Edward." And... well, me.

"Let's start things on our end, shall we?"

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Chapter 700: Start Of Operation [Pt 2]

"Alright, Neron. You're up." I smiled at the most vital element of our first step—as well as the major powerhouse we had on our team.

Neron was going to be the one to initiate the first contact on the base of our adversaries—in essence, the Nether Cult Headquarters.

'We've known their location for some time now. So, Neron will use his Timeless State to infiltrate the area. With everything stopped in the world, he'll conduct a survey and inform us of everything we need to know about the area we're about to invade.'

I wanted this whole thing done far sooner, but there was a valid reason we were just relying on it now. According to Neron, the First Seat was able to sense his presence when he used Time Immersion.

'If that's the case, it's possible that he will also be able to sense Neron if he surveys the area, even though the entire world is paused. We can't take any chances or reveal our cards beforehand.' That was the reason we decided to do this at the last minute.

'It's not going to take any time, considering the nature of Neron's Timeless World; He's the only one who will be out of the natural flow of time, hence everything is stopped till he returns.'

It would simply be like a flash.

"Got it." Neron smiled, resonating with his Arcana, no doubt.

I knew I was going to be seeing Neron a second later, but this stuff never got old. I kept my eyes peeled, watching as he vanished from sight.

And then, I awaited his instant return.

"Welp... here we go." Neron looked around him, and as expected, everyone was frozen in time.

He looked at Jared's expectant face, and he could tell that the young lad was expecting him to instantly appear once the survey was done.

'Fair enough.' Neron considered teasing him, but considering the nature of the mission, he decided against it.

There would be plenty of time for fun after their job was complete.

'I feel a bit tired—considering the fact that I had to operate [The Hermit] nonstop, the whole time. Well, it's no big deal, but...'

Fortunately, he wasn't exhausted to the point of not being able to use any of his abilities. Timeless World and Time Immersion were still options. And, of course, his other abilities outside the realm of time. However, he knew full well that he wasn't at full strength.

'I'm having a long sleep after this.'

Neron vanished—or rather, he was just that fast—instantly appearing above the coordinates Jared gave him.

'Well, this is the Nether Cult's Headquarters, right? As expected, it's cloaked.' All he could see for miles was a vast body of water.

It was just the sea, through and through.

However, he had expected this much. A smile formed on his face, and he knew a barrier was right in front of him.

'If I interfere with the barrier, then it's possible that I will be caught. It's a possibility... and it's a definite future that I'm going to be on the other side, right?'

Neron grinned. Wasn't this the perfect time to try out a new ability he had cultivated during the time everyone had been practising? He'd had to undo his Time Loop so that he could grow beyond his previous strength, and boy did he grow.

He hadn't shown this to Jared yet, but...

'[Future Insertion]'

In a flash, Neron became something akin to an after-image. His appearance was pale and borderline transparent.

In return, another Neron appeared at the other end of the illusory barrier. He pretty much looked the same, but an excited grin covered his face as he stared at his afterimage.

"It works here too. Great!"

What he just did was [Future Insertion]—a Spell that functioned exactly the way it sounded. Not only could Neron insert himself into the time stream, but he could take the place of his future self, so long as the event was probable.

For example, if he was going to be in a particular area at some point in the future, Neron could insert himself into that future, teleporting to that point instantly.

'Well, it's not instant teleportation since I'll be there at the time my future self would have been there. But... since we're in Timeless World, I can be anywhere in no time at all.'

It was something akin to time travel, but with no consequences—especially when it was as instant as this.

"Alright then... let's take a look around, shall we?" Neron removed his gaze from his afterimage that had practically faded away, and instead feasted his eyes on the vast land that was beneath him.

'Wow...'

The patch of land was completely circular—like it was artificially made. The ground was surprisingly all white, like it was covered in light sand. The ground's surface seemed smooth, and everything appeared clean.

The massive island contained several structures—one which looked like a storehouse, another that resembled an army barrack; and several other important landmarks that Neron could not quite recognize.

However, if there was anything that stood out, it would be the massive building that found itself within an equally large compound. It resembled a crossbreed between a cathedral and a mansion, and one could easily guess its purpose.

'I'm guessing that is the headquarters, huh?' Neron was using his immensely powerful vision to cover the absurdly large island, taking in what details he could from his current distance.

'There's so much Nether around, though. Jared was right; the others wouldn't have fared so great here... well, except Maria and Elrich.' Neron thought Asa had a chance as well, but not the other three.

Even his heightened senses felt dulled by the waves of Nether that distorted everything on the island. His only advantage was his constant resonance with [The Hermit].

'I'll need to have a closer look, after all.' Neron thought, finally descending from his elevated position.

He had his work cut out for him, and it was amazing how only a second—or even less—would pass for everyone waiting for him. In a way, that told him not to rush, but he also had to consider the First Seat.

That man was his major interest in the Nether Cult. Neron had so many things he was curious about—but that had to involve them making contact.

'Well, I can sense him... he's still.' Even with the amount of distance between them, Neron could tell just how much power the First Seat possessed.

He wondered if he could take him out with Timeless World.

'Nah. The moment I make contact with him, he'll be brought into Timeless World with me. There's no guarantee that he'll die from my first strike. It's better not to ruin the plan.'

As such, Neron stuck to his duty—surveillance.

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After spending hours of his time diligently checking the nook and cranny of everything around, all that was left were two buildings.

'That massive building that looks like a research centre... and then the main headquarters.'

Neron was going to save the headquarters for last, so he decided to check the research centre first.

So far, so good; nothing worthy of note had occurred. Sure, he found some very interesting things—like what appeared to be a breeding area that would have had several Nether Beasts within, as well as another place that seemed to be reserved for human experimentation.

'Nothing occurred in Timeless World, so...' Neron wondered what new things he would discover in this research centre he was about to investigate.

What other atrocity awaited him? He was genuinely curious. Too curious to have noticed something that was too minuscule to have warranted his keen observation.

"Uh...?" Neron felt himself step on something, something akin to a muddy puddle.

The puddle was black—a seemingly harmless black patch of liquid, and he wondered why he didn't notice it before stepping there.

'Illusion? But wait... if I stepped on it, then—?!' Before Neron could complete his thought, the black puddle suddenly expanded, and a huge pool of fluid-like darkness suddenly surged forth.

>VWWWUUUUUUUUSSSSHHHHH<

The Nether quality of the burst of liquid was enough to interfere with Neron's barrier, forcefully causing the darkness to completely envelop his body within mere moments— It was faster than he could utilize any other Spell.

Thus, in an instant, Neron was consumed by the darkness. As soon as that occurred, both he and the dark wave... completely vanished.