

Happy early Thanksgiving guys and girls. I got a bit sidetracked here at times, (and lost Thursday through Sunday last week) but I think this finishes off showing all of the organization/work going on in the background in Egypt, and we deal with the Wizarding World's latest idiocy. I had hoped to show Harry waking up, but more on that in the after action report LOL.

Anyway, I hope you enjoy this even without Harry making an appearance.

As always, if you see a mistake, tell me. Heck, any feedback is good feedback LOL. I Grammarlied the chapter somewhat, but then made numerous changes to it afterward. Ugh. In particular if anyone sees a name in the wrong place or just a weird name being used, please tell me.

Regardless, stay safe, stay well, and keep going forward!

And for those wondering, the patron only poll will close tonight!!

### **Chapter 30: Wizards Wildly Wonky**

It was almost inevitable that the reconstruction efforts in Egypt would continue to hit snags. Not only was the actual reconstruction effort tremendous in scope, made up of numerous only slightly smaller tasks that needed to be worked on continually across Egypt, but people were people, magical or not and kept on making trouble. This was why Rias was not surprised to be pulled from her work on making teleportation tunnels to a hasty meeting with Abraxas about one more than normally annoying example of someone looking out solely for himself.

“Do we know if this small-time mayor is being backed up by the survivors from the local police force, or does he have his own group of toughs on hand among the survivors he’s suborned or had under his employ before? I can’t imagine he’s been able to convince the entire village to let him horde the supplies we’ve sent there. And what exactly happened to the team of surveyors who first reported this?” Rias asked, stretching in place and ignoring the looks she got from some of the men manning the communications desks nearby. She had just done five different teleportation tunnels and felt she was due a good stretch.

*And I doubt any of these men have been away from their stations for hours. They deserve to look all they want, so long as they don’t try to touch. I think my use of my Power of Destruction on them would be a tad overkill, but teleporting them into the nearest body of water would probably get the point across if my last name did not.*

Most of the communication people were still working with the leprechauns, but at least here in Alexandria, the local communications network had been repaired by this point. Power was still an ongoing issue outside the three points of the Potter Triangle – Damanhur, Alexandria and Damietta – but within those three cities the electricity, water were all back online. But only Alexandria even had their radio towers working, let alone their phone lines. *Who knew how fragile that system is?*

“He’s using survivors from the local police at present. As for what happened to the survey team, this village mayor dealt with them somehow. All we know is that they reported this village had around five hundred or more survivors and seemed organized. The next moment, the communicating leprechaun said something about hoarding. We heard background shouts, a sound like several guns firing, and then

the leprechaun fell silent. He hasn't contacted the group of leprechauns handling Mayor Zosar's close-in communications since, and he reported it to us. Zosar has so few resources to spare out there he can't afford to send anyone else to check up on it."

Abraxas scowled a little, shaking his head, his face twisted into a rictus of grief and controlled rage. "It is still quite strange to speak of areas around Cairo as being 'out there' considering how quickly a plane could make the trip from Alexandria to Cairo and how it was the capital of my nation before all this. But one cannot argue with the reality that the Harvest and Culling have left us."

Rias nodded, knowing intellectually that, in this case, the reality was that the Potter Triangle did not extend to Cairo and that it was very much the outer edge of their organized reconstruction efforts. In the Potter Triangle, order was being mostly maintained. The areas beyond it, especially further southeast towards the Indian Ocean beyond Cairo, still hadn't seen anything like the organized reconstruction efforts going on elsewhere.

And as for the emotional way Abraxas spoke, well, Rias didn't know who had used them first, but the terms that the two ancient villains had used to describe their actions here in Egypt had spread. The Culling, when they had summoned monsters and the spirits of ancient dead throughout Egypt to sow fear and chaos. Then, the Harvest, when they had reaped the souls of those who had come to believe in the power of the pillars that promised safety against the monsters of the night. No Egyptian could stop themselves from using those terms, spitting them like epithets, feeling intense rage and anger at what had been done to their nation, most particularly the grand betrayal that the pillars and the Harvest represented.

Indeed, Rias was wondering exactly what kind of impact that anger and hatred would have once all was said and done. Not just towards people with magic but religion in general.

The civilians of Egypt were not stupid. And it was very clear by this point that those who had truly **believed** in the power behind the pillars, were the ones who had remained dead after Asia's Miracle had washed over the nation. And many people across Egypt were wondering if such belief could be manipulated, then what did it say about the Islamic or Catholic faiths? Rias had seen people talking about that. Quietly so far, but still, it was there.

So when Rias spoke, she tiptoed about that aspect of things delicately, not using the incendiary terms that Abraxas had. "Zosar has actually been impressing me with how well he's doing in bringing some order to Cairo, considering how so much of the population there fell to the... ritual."

"True. I believe that Zosar is a perfect example of a square peg in a square hole. He's abrasive, obstreperous and arrogant but also extremely competent and a hard worker to boot. The fact that he was born in Cairo and stayed there most of his life is another mark in his favor there. But what should we do about this group? I'm sorry to say, but magic is still the only way we can get around most of the time."

Rias scowled, biting her finger. "I will ask the Aurors in Damietta to pull off a few of their men from other projects and provide transportation once you reach Cairo. The magicals in Cairo are spread just as thin as Zosar's folk. I might need to send Proudfoot out there with some reinforcements if survey teams are going to start running into organized trouble like this more often. We've dealt with that sort of thing inside the Triangle, but doing the same outside it is going to take time."

For a moment, Rias thanked the Maous of the past that the idea of hoarding food, water, or simply lording it over the other survivors was not a problem that would occur to any of the wizard volunteers, Aurors or Shinsengumi. Such an idea would be very silly.

Of course, other problems crossed over from the non-magical to the magical, in particular, the concept of abusing power. Several times since she had arrived in Egypt, Rias had been informed of volunteering witches or wizards using their powers in ways that took advantage of the non-magicals around them. One particularly egregious case had apparently happened at the hospital but had also been dealt with there by other magicals when they found out about it... via burning the Chief Healer who had been caught in the act like kindling.

But all in all, the wizarding side of things seemed to be keeping itself focused on not causing further trouble for anyone. *And remember Bill and Fleur sent a message to you to speak about that very thing,* Rias reminded herself. *And after that I need to start questioning Kuroka. Even with the Interdict we could still get any really important intelligence out to my brother if we have to, and the faster we question her, the better.*

“How many, and do you think you can peel off a magic carpet from somewhere? I want to send at least two squads down there at the very least,” Abraxas asked grimly. “This bastard apparently took out a survey team before they had time to retreat or call for help. We haven’t run into any local warlord who could call on that level of firepower before. Worse is the manpower he seems able to call on.”

“I agree with you, but all of the magic carpets are already spoken for delivering needed medicine, healers or other supplies,” Rias admitted regretfully. “We just don’t have enough of them to go around. But I believe some of the wizards are already working on that, coming up with simple, short-term solutions. Casting spells on regular carpets and then just tugging them along via broomsticks. I won’t say it is the safest way to travel, and your men will probably never want to get back on one again, but it will work to get them there, at least.”

Abraxas blanched at that, wondering precisely what kind of safety-measure-type spells such a quick, dirty solution would leave behind. After all, if the wizards could do something like that safely, then why hadn’t they already done so. After a moment, he decided that he didn’t want to know. He simply nodded and called for one of his communications officers to rush out and draw up two squads from the pool of reserves stationed nearby for this task. *Blast it. If only communications weren’t so broken outside of our own, the examples we’ve had to make already would have stopped this from happening. But so be it. And if this mayor had ties to organized crime from before all this occurred, which he must to have enough firepower to kill a survey team so quickly, so much the better.*

Abraxas was no fool, nor was he an innocent. He had not become a Major General of the highly politicized Egyptian military by being such. But he had no connections to actual criminal organizations. That did not mean that other officers had done the same. And it was something of an open secret that corruption and crime had run rampant throughout Egypt’s government and bureaucracy. It would be easy to, say, get your hands on a lot of small arms or a mortar gun, although hopefully not as easy to get your hands on ammunition for said. Not as long as you were staying in Egypt itself, anyway.

Now, however? Well, if such people tried to get up to their own tricks during a time of crisis, then just like normal hoarders or despots trying to carve out their own little fiefdoms, military laws applied. Most particularly, the law of expediency. A bullet was far less expensive than a jail cell, after all.

As the man he had assigned to that task left, Abraxas turned back to Rias. He was about to ask her about something else on the magical side of things, specifically how the dwarves were doing on making more of the parts the engineers needed to get more radio towers up, when one of the guards entered, saluting. He addressed both Abraxas and Rias as he said, "Sir, ma'am, Lady Lily has returned, and she seems to have brought along several more... young women who give off the same sort of aura as yourself and Mistress Akeno, miss."

Rias smiled widely. "Well, now, it not have done as well as I'd hoped, but it looks as if that fishing trip did at least bring in some game. Send them in, please." As the guard left, Rias chuckled to herself, shaking her head. "Lady Lily, is it? And here I thought it was just the folk from Danan that treated her so."

"Lady is an easy title to give out and neatly sidesteps any attempts to try to pigeonhole any of you in some kind of organizational chart or command structure," Abraxas said dryly, a shot across the bows that Rias chuckled at, knowing that he had a time or two been somewhat flummoxed by how easily Rias had taken control of the magical side of things despite looking as if she was only in her twenties.

Of course, the man didn't know that was stretching it a bit, considering her actual age. Thankfully, her maturity (and body type) made it look as if she was a college student rather than a high schooler.

She smiled happily as Lily bounded through the room's only doorway, showing all of her normal energetic energy, leaping up into Rias's arms. Rias hugged the girl tightly and then put her down, keeping one arm around the shorter girl's shoulders as she beamed at her. "Well done, Lily! Was it as hard as we feared?"

"Kind of. I had trouble thinking about you, Daddy, Egypt and trouble all in the same sentence. But I was able to think about trouble in terms of Danan easily enough," Lily said, scowling a little and all in annoyance. "Luna didn't seem to have much trouble, and neither did the fairies."

"Yes, how the fairies think seems to sidestep the Interdict quite well, which is somewhat annoying. And Luna's a law unto herself," Rias agreed, causing Lily to giggle. With Lily still tucked into her side, Rias turned her smile to Sona. "Good to see you, Sona. Have you been told everything that's been going on here?"

"We've gotten the shorthand, at least. And I find it quite appalling that this Interdict enchantment is still holding. I have been kept abreast of many of the disasters going around the world, but the one here in Egypt hasn't made the news at all. Quite disturbing, really," Sona admitted.

"True. The number of ways the magical have to mess with minds or even those who know about magic is really disturbing. The power of the individual those wards work on just doesn't matter at all. But tell me, did my little trick with my Onii-chan work?"

"It did, but Maou Lucifer apparently got back from an extremely difficult job of his own just before your message arrived. Grayfia sat on him and refused to let him come through to Kuoh, instead calling ahead. When I couldn't give them any information about what trouble you might be in and that everything was

all right there, the only one who seemed a little still was Maou Astaroth. The impression that he was tired as well, but he might follow up on things in a few days or so.”

“Ajuka is somewhat scatterbrained when it comes to things outside of his own experiments and labs. Hopefully, you won’t follow up on that. I don’t know what will happen if he tries to use magic in Kuoh, as our wards will certainly not like it at all,” Rias mused, shaking her head. “We might want to ask some more of the Lunas fairies to head back there and watch, just to intervene in case something disastrous happened.”

In this case, disastrous meant that the magi-scientist Ajuka tried to examine the wards, not realizing precisely how alive they were and how they would react to such.

“Still, it’s good to see you. Can I assume that your actual presence here means you’re willing to pitch in?” Rias deliberately decided not to wonder what would happen if a Maou-level entity tried to use magic in Kuoh right now. *I’ve got more than enough on my plate, thank you, but if I return and find Kuoh no longer there, I will be most annoyed!*

Sona nodded. Unlike Rias, she really didn’t feel any obligation to jump in to help clean up this disaster, but neither was she blind to the cost to humanity, which she found quite repugnant. “Where do you need our help?”

It was decided that to start off, Sona and her group would head to Cairo and help put down the same mayor-shaped problem Rias and Abraxas had just spoken of. They would then work their way back towards the Potter triangle, doing much the same work. This way, the Egyptian military forces going along not only got transportation – Sona and her peerage could just levitate and carry a truck- but a lot of magical firepower to back them up. It would also get the locals used to another new group of magicals and would let Sona see what the trouble here in Egypt was like out of the pointy end. After which, Sona would become Rias’s chief aide in further organizing the magical side of things, while her peerage would join Akeno, Kiba and the rest, giving them time to take breaks or as another group of troubleshooters.

But, Rias decided to send Lily back to Danan, although she did take some time to walk the with the girl through Alexandria from the command post back to the hotel where the fal stone sat. This worked both as a break for Rias and some time with her daughter, which both of them enjoyed. Although Rias was amused to note how Lilly’s attention continued to wander away, and others in the same direction towards the Nile as well. That was quite fascinating.

Soon they were back at the hotel and going through the fal stone to the one overlooking the cliffs on Tir Na Nog. It took but a few minutes to get in touch with Luna, who had stayed in Danan after explaining matters to Sona to check in with her husband and ‘court’. When asked about sending several more fairies through to Kuoh, Luna only requested that they be read into the wards like the previous group had been so they wouldn’t get fried if they tried to use any magic the wards could discern as offensive.

The fairies, on the other hand...

“This sounds ridiculously boring!” One fairy said, flying all around Lily and Rias.

“Right, right. Even if it is the High King’s wife asking, or even the princess herself, this sounds way too much like one of those dwarven job things. BORING!” Another said, flying low down and buzzing across

the top of Lily's feet kept causing her to giggle and laugh, stepping backward as the fairy disappeared through the grass as if merging with it rather than simply flying through.

"What exactly would you want in payment then?" Luna asked before Rias could speak up.

"We want to play!" Came from several different voices as the other three fairies that Luna had chosen for the task came back down through the foliage where they had flown once the task had been explained to them. "This place, it's inside an area that you call a school, right? Where there are lots of young humans? It sounds like a lot of fun. Let us play with them."

"... You know, if you all were winter Fae, that concept would terrify me. As it is, no physical harm and no permanent changes to the students or the environment. And especially, no using magic where it can be seen," Rias said, throwing her arms in the air with a huff. This was such a minor issue she really didn't want to spend more time on it. "For example, you can use magic to tie someone's shoelaces together so long as you're not caught doing it. But if you tie someone's hair together, that's something that would be noticed without the use of magic to cover your tracks and would be impossible to hide. See the difference?"

Even though all of the fairies had practically gagged at the word shoes, they weren't leprechauns after all, one after another, they nodded, and Rias went on. "For every hour there, you can each play three tricks on different targets."

That brought on another argument, as the fairies wanted to be paid in days rather than specific numbers of tricks, but Rias was firm and soon had an agreement. She waited there until Lily came back through the runic connection, hugged the girl again and made certain that Lily knew to go through to Egypt periodically before letting the girl take her through back to Egypt again. When the dimensional doorway closed, Rias sighed, then slapped her cheeks twice each. "Back to work, you!"

In contrast, Lily played for what felt like another hour to her here in Tir Na Nog, racing around with Titan, who she had yet to bring through to Egypt, despite the pouts sent her way. She wanted to the next time, and Rias had said she could bring him along, and Luna wanted to make certain that he wouldn't race off away from her at the first opportunity or the next interesting smell. Both Luna and the fairies have a lot of fun helping to train Titan to ignore such and stay with his bonded mistress before Lily decided to head to the island to check on her father, Asia, and Yasaka.

Kunou would also be there, although she had taken to transforming into her fox form and exploring the island when Lily was there with Sona. Since that had been three hours ago, Lily didn't know what she was up to now. *Kunou might actually be hungry. Darn, so am I, come to think of it...yep, grab Kunou and go eat. That sounds like a great idea.*

Coming through the fal stone situated on top of the dormant volcano, Lily paused, taking in the view. It was early morning here, on the equator of Danan, and the site of the ocean out beyond the warm, welcoming island drew her gaze for a moment. For just a second, Lily forgot her worries and her stomach and wondered what was out there. What else lay beyond this island to the south, to the east and west. *There is so much more to explore here!*

Then, the littlest Potter shook herself and headed down the trail towards the cluster of hobbit holes and houses built along the river. *Oooh, maybe one of them is awake. Maybe I can give them a scare! Like they did to me when I saw them all tired out and sleeping!*

With that, Lily motioned Titan for quiet, and the two of them stalked down the trail silently until Lily could peer into the master bedroom's window. In this way, they saw Yasaka awake. The kitsune stood beside the bed, looking at Harry and Asia, who had been laid out side-by-side next to her. On Asia's other side, Yubelluna sprawled, still asleep, but far closer to rousing herself than the other two to Yasaka's eyes.

Yasaka was not a very experienced magical healer, but she was a Sage, a being who had a natural connection to the background magic of the world and nature itself, which gave her senses far beyond even other magical beings like other youkai or members of the Three Factions. She had never dealt with soul damage before, though, and after even a cursory glance at Asia she had become deeply concerned by the soul damage there. It looked to her as if it was healing, but there was still something missing something fundamental to Asia's soul was gone, and would probably never return.

The worried expression she wore on her face when she pulled away from Asia was almost enough to stop Lily from pouncing on her. But by that point, Lily had snuck her way into the room directly behind Yasaka. And since it seemed a waste, she waited until Yasaka had turned her attention back to her dad before leaping forward. Only to discover that Yasaka had known she was there all along.

One of Yasaka's tails flicked out backward, catching Lily around the waist and pulling her in as Yasaka looked over her shoulder at the redhead, chittering. "You have to get up very early in the morning to pull one over a trickster like me, Lily-han." Then she was pulling the young girl into a hug, which Lily returned, not at all put out from having her little ambush spoiled. "How are you doing, lovey? I take it you brought us all back here to have more time to heal. It's worked wonders for me. I can smell Ku-han around the place, too, but she's not here now. Any idea where she is?"

"Kunou's in fox form somewhere, I think, hunting around with Okuri-inu. And letting you sleep had better have helped! You were out of it for days!" Lily said, harrumphing and crossing her arms and what she fondly thought of as a put-upon manner but came out more as a pout.

Yasaka's eyes widened, and she frowned a little. Connected as she was to the dragon nest under Kyoto, Yasaka had never had to deal with magical exhaustion on that scale before. The ley lines should have been able to replenish her magic much faster. *An unforeseen consequence of the ritual Rias and Harry created to let me travel freely, maybe?* That made some sense, but it also might have been an example of both magical exhaustion and mental damage that her body needed to heal. *I might have only been acting like a secondary battery to Asia's efforts, but who knows what even that could have done to me.*

Setting that thought aside, Yasaka booped Lily on the nose, smiling cheerily at the little girl.

"Regardless, I'm good to go now. So what say we find Ku-han, get some food, and then you take me through to see Rias? And I'll see what I can do to help in Egypt."

With the Undertaking set once more to one-to-one in terms of the time difference, it was pushing dinner time in Egypt by the time Rias greeted Yasaka happily, hugging the other woman tightly. Lily and Kunou both snuggled into the hug as well, ignoring the glances they were getting by the people around them.

A point me spell had let the group from Danan find Rias easily, since the redhead hadn't been in the command center like the last time Lily had stopped in. Instead, she had returned to her on creating numerous teleportation tunnels. This was being done in various areas around Alexandria the teleportation tunnels separated by the marakiz, the Egyptian equivalent of counties, that they served. Rias was currently opening up more tunnels into the center of the Potter Triangle to a number of small towns there from the southwest portion of Alexandria, a large car park having been set aside for this purpose.

Taking all this in from around Rias's side, Yasaka reluctantly pulled back from the taller girl's chest, ending the group hug to gesture around them at the seven teleportation circles in sight on the ground, and the number of people waiting to enter the "Lily told me you've been busy. But this is something else."

"Tell me about it. I've never been involved in such a large organizational effort before, and it has been like making a castle as the tide tries to smash it down with every wave," Rias shook her head. "If not for the Egyptian military being so willing to work with us for the most part it would have been impossible. As it is, we're slowly shifting the tide, but there's still so much to do. I hope you're up to helping too? We can always use more magicals."

As Rias finished speaking, she noticed that Yasaka, despite listening intently to her, kept on glancing one direction, as did Lily. It was that last that gave her the clue, and Rias reached out, gently shaking Yasaka causing the shorter woman to look back at her. "You can feel it too, can't you? The Blessing on the Nile."

"I think it is because I am a sage, but yes, I can feel it, it's like a glowing line appearing in my peripheral vision since I came through from Danan," Yasaka explained apologetically. "I think I want to examine that, but where were you thinking of sending me?"

"Damietta. If you could shift into your giant fox form when you get there, I think Sala would be much obliged. The problems within the city are being caused a few dozen groups of ex-military men trying to make trouble within the city, which they could readily handle, admittedly. But there are several officers of equal rank to Sala's but with more seniority who want to take over. We tried to give some of them jobs elsewhere, but they refused to budge, refusing to take our orders as they see our 'organization' such as it is as illegitimate. I was thinking of sending Tiamat that way, but with your arrival, you could probably do a better job. Making it clear you're big and nasty and only willing to work with Sala will help him immensely."

Yasaka smirked. "Sounds good to me. But first, the river."

Rias nodded, then turned back, restarting her work on the teleportation tunnel. Quickly finishing, she stepped back, allowing the nearby relief convoy (an extremely pretentious name for two jeeps and one truck in her opinion, but it still fit) to go through to the town she had just opened up, one near the center of the Potter Triangle. "Give me another day, and I will have every city, town and village within the Potter triangle hooked together," Rias said proudly, slapping her hands together as if celebrating a job well done as the teleportation tunnel closed behind the last jeep.

"And you're not feeling tired or anything? The last thing we need to do is replace me in that bed in Danan with you," Yasaka said worriedly.



"I'm fine. In fact, I feel good. As if I'm an athlete just about reaching that point where you begin to really feel the burn," Rias said. "Still, I'll show you to the river. Cú and Gasper are somewhere along its length, practicing."

Yasaka hadn't been formally introduced to Cú, although she had heard of them before this, mostly from Lily, admittedly. Thus, perhaps she could be excused for the fact that the first words she spoke when spotting Cú giving directions to a box-wearing, shivering and shaking Gasper were, "Good grief, he looks like a cross between an American biker and a live roll player who has taken it a bit too seriously. That is not a combination I would've ever thought to see."

Rias choked in a laugh while Cú took one look at Yasaka, then Rias, and sighed theatrically. "Dammit, another pretty lass that belongs to the High King, is it? When are ya gonna introduce me to someone who isn't already involved with you and Harry?"

"I could actually introduce you to a few now, but I don't think during this crisis is the proper time to be thinking with your lower head. Besides, I would have assumed someone with your legend would be a little leery of doing so. A magic-using woman isn't going to put up with the 'many affairs' that Emer did," Rias retorted.

Cú rolled his eyes but did not try to defend himself. It was true that marriage had not sat easily on him at first, but after a few dalliances in their first year together, he had been faithful from then on. But now was not the time to wax serious about such a thing. Instead, he bowed grandly over Yasaka's hand, waving one arm idly towards Gasper. "'tis charming to meet such a beautiful woman, regardless of circumstances. This boxed boyo is..."

"Gasper. We've actually been introduced before." Yasaka's eyes narrowed, as did Rias's, as they watched something happen for a moment as if time had sped up for a few balls that were being magically floated around the area, whereas others had their time slowed down. "You're making remarkable progress."

"I hate to admit it, but we weren't at first. My own teacher wasn't exactly the most... understanding sort, and I tried the same style with Gasper. But after I allowed him to put that silly box on his head... and smacked him upside the head to knock him out of the weird alter ego his Sacred Gear thing tired to force him into, the boyo actually started to get to work. I was then able to figure out a few runic arrays to help siphon the magical power he was accidentally releasing. Time enough later to work on larger targets. Now we're just working on figuring out what all he can do, not how much."

Both women nodded at that, and Cú asked hopefully if there was any other job that needed doing he could be set to. "This is... nice... but I'd prefer something to sink my teeth into."

Rias snickered, knowing Cú was actually exceptionally bored, only really having agreed to help Gasper because his Sacred Gear was one of those made during the Catholic conquest of Ireland. Still the man "Keep working with Gasper for another hour. Then, head over to the command post to speak with Abraxas. We have a few criminals we might need to send you out after. That seems like something you'd be good at, yes?"

"So long as they actually try to put up a fight, that's fine by me," Cú intoned simply. "I was known just as much as a hunter as I was a warrior. But I ain't interested in prey that won't fight back."

“One witch, twelve soldiers, and a local crime boss who apparently made some kind of deal with the witch, who in turn brought in the soldiers,” Rias answered crisply. “I think you can take it as a given they’ll fight back.”

That report had come in a bare twenty minutes before Rias left the command post to resume her work from Akeno, and she and Abraxas had been wondering how to handle it. The group had made a run for it and had disappeared out past Damanhur, heading straight south away from the Nile. This quickly allowed them to outpace the small survey teams in that area still looking for groups of survivors. They had apparently kidnapped several young women and men, along with stealing a lot of treasure from a local museum. What their plans were, or why the unidentified witch was working with the local crime boss, Rias didn’t know nor care. But that kind of thing needed to be stamped out just as much as any other criminal act did.

*I’m quickly coming to agree with Abraxas. Maybe having Tiamat and the survey teams shouting about the penalties for such things is a good idea. Setting an example is only good if people are actually able to hear about it,* Rias reflected crossly.

“Tell me you don’t want any of them back alive?” Cú begged.

“I don’t know. Can you operate a magic carpet to bring back what the group stole along with the kidnap victims?” Rias asked, shrugging her shoulders. “If so, no, prisoners are not necessary.”

Cú’s answering grin was enough of a response to that.

Yasaka and Rias left Cú there for the moment, heading along the river’s edge where Lily and Kunou had been talking to Gasper while the adults conversed. Lily and Kunou had both helped occasionally getting Gasper more used to being around people, and considered him a friend. Seeing him regress to the point he needed a box on his head once more was annoying.

Collecting the children, Rias and Yasaka made their way down to the river bank, where Lily began to stare at the river as if it was hypnotizing her in some fashion. The moment they reached an area where they could actually touch the water, Lily tried to go ahead, her body shifting to her werewolf form as she charged forward. But Rias had been ready for this, and grabbed the girl by the shoulder, holding her in place despite Lily’s enhanced strength.

Lily turned, growling, but Rias ignored that, pulling the young phoenix werewolf into a hug, breaking her line of sight on the river and with it whatever had beguiled the younger redhead. “Oh, no, you don’t, my girl. And don’t growl at me, either. I’m not averse to sending you to your hotel room and magicking the door shut for a bit to give you a time out.”

Lily shuddered, shook herself, and then hugged Rias back. “Ugh, sorry, Mum. But that spell on the river, you all have called it a Blessing? It’s calling to me. I want to touch it, yet at the same time, I... I don’t, because it’s calling so loud. It kind of pushed everything else out of my head this close. Sorry.”

Rias looked over at Yasaka, who shrugged her shoulders. “We’ll be heading off away from the river in a moment, Lily. Let Yasaka see what she can tell us about it first, and then you don’t have to come back here anymore.”

With Rias still holding a now shaken Lily, Yasaka knelt down, holding her hand out above the water, closing her eyes as she concentrated on her Sage senses. Yasaka's Sage senses allowed her to somewhat bridge the gap between regular magical and deific perception, and with that, she could feel at least the power within the river, if not all of the construct that power was shaped into. Almost immediately, she began to realize why it was calling out to Lily. The blessing within spoke to her almost like a scent with her sage senses, a scent of Harry, but she could sense that the, the renewing of the Blessing was somehow unfinished. Like it needed something in order for the Blessing to come into full effect.

It wasn't alive by any means, nothing like the defensive arrays back in Kuoh, but there was something there. "It is almost like the edges of the Blessing has little feelers and is searching out for something to finish itself. I don't know a better way to explain it. I can't access it, but I believe Harry could, and maybe Lily. Beyond that, I can only tell it really is a Blessing of some kind, so it's doubtful it could be harmful in any way. But what it could be I have no idea."

**"NO way!"** Lily nearly shouted as shook her head, shivering against Rias. "It wants me to do something, but it, it scares me. It's too big!"

That startled Rias, as Lily very rarely admitted to being scared of anything, and she nodded slowly. "Well, I think that's one mystery solved just enough for now, then. I trust you both can ignore the call from this Blessing now?" When both Yasaka and Lily nodded, the young girl quite fervently, Rias nodded back. "Then let's head back."

"Mmm. Me and Kunou should go back to Danan and be ready to tell Daddy, Asia and Yube what's been going on, right?" Lily asked. In reality, before her little brush with the river, Lily had been thinking about somehow escaping Rias and Yasaka and maybe finding Koneko and going exploring. But now, she just really wanted to see her dad. The call from the river had overridden all of her other thoughts, and that had been really scary.

Rias nodded, then turned, still hugging her daughter to her side, quickly joined by Kunou and Yasaka. The four of them made their way back to the hotel Yasaka and the others had come from previously. As they went, Yasaka was amused to see Lily getting waves and smiles from everyone they passed. This seemed to cheer the little girl up, and soon, she was walking beside Rias instead of squished into her side, waving at people in the crowds around them. "Don't look now, but you and little red seem to be gaining quite a following around here."

"I think everyone within Alexandria at least knows what Lily and the others have been up to since the beginning of this crisis. As for myself, I think the teleportation tunnels are winning me quite a bit of acceptance as well. I can only hope that, and the ongoing efforts from the majority of the magicals involved in the reconstruction efforts will continue to help defray the anger that boils in far too many Egyptians towards magic in general given what happened here," Rias said grimly, even as she smiled and waved at one particularly plump looking woman who had just waved at her.

Yasaka winced, understanding how pointed that phrase was, and changed the subject as they continued the walk through the still magnificent city.

When they got back to the hotel, Yasaka was somewhat amused to note that despite the importance of the fal stone within, there were no guards stationed there, magical or otherwise. When questioned

about this, Rias shrugged. "I have Koneko, Kala, and others coming through here periodically, along with several of the leprechauns stationed out on the balcony."

She gestured, and several fairies and two leprechauns waved from outside, where Yasaka had missed them before. "They are really good at hiding, and those little hammers of theirs pack a wallop."

Nodding at that, Yasaka also took note of the fact that, barring those few, there was no one around any longer. Thus, after sending the two little girls back to the island with many hugs and kisses, Yasaka did something she had been hoping to do since seeing Rias working on the teleportation tunnel earlier. Before Rias could say or do anything, she found Yasaka pulling her into a tight hug, the older woman's lips seeking hers.

How long the two of them made out, Rias didn't know, but it ended up with her being pressed against the back of the bar that separated the kitchenette in the suite from the rest of the sitting area as Yasaka began to lick and nibble at her throat. "What," Rias gasped, "was that for? Not that I'm complaining."

"It just occurred to me that ever since that party, none of us have had any romance-type time with one another. And you looked so damn sexy giving out orders and being all officious," Yasaka stated, chittering as she pulled back before nuzzling into the top of Rias's chest, which was about his high as she could reach given the height disparity. "Think of that as a down payment for when you and I and Harry can finally get to gather all at once."

Rias went a little cross-eyed at that, a small, sultry smile appearing on her face as her hands roamed up and down Yasaka's back, reaching further down to give her rear a firm squeeze. "I think after all of this, all of us deserve some dates, although I don't know if you and I will get the first ones. I think that might go to Yubelluna and Kala, given they've been here since the very beginning."

"I don't care where I am in line, so long as I get some service," Yasaka quipped, causing Rias to giggle. Her laughter turned into laughs that would have had her collapsing to her knees if not for the bar behind her and Yasaka's tight, warm body pressed against her. "Maybe if we all go after him one after another and don't let him sleep for a few days, we can finally find the limits of Harry's endurance."

Of course, Rias couldn't spend as much time as she wanted with Yasaka. They both had duties to perform. But she did spend a few more moments simply hugging and kissing the other girl before returning to their duties.

Despite the minor hiccups, with Alexandria more and more returning to some semblance of normality and the military leading the way, peace was being maintained throughout the ravaged country to a great extent. This was, in a horrid sort of way, helped by the fact that there were so very few survivors below Cairo along the river Nile, but even so, it was immense progress, which only gained momentum every time Rias put down a new teleportation tunnel. With that bottleneck removed, others reared their heads, with medicine being most important, along with food. Water, thanks to the blessing on the Nile and the word of that spreading, was no longer a necessity in most

communities. But food, particularly baby food, still needed to flow, which Luna and her fairies saw to on the purchasing end of things, while Rias saw to the distribution side.

After finishing two more teleportation tunnels Rias was able to take it easy for the rest of the night. This meant that she could make the meeting with Bill and his wife as well as hopefully interrogate Kuroka tonight.

Rias had to put that off for a bit longer, as Koneko had volunteered her superstrength to help clear some debris from in front of a hanger at the Alexandrian airport so that the engineers could get at the planes within. But she was still determined to question Kuroka about what she knew about Akhenaten, Nefertiti and the Khaos Brigade as soon as possible.

But until then, at least this first meeting would give Rias some nice tea. "Thank you, it smells nice."

"You're welcome," Fleur answered, finishing pouring herself a cup, then taking a seat on one side of the square-shaped table, with Bill sitting across from Rias. "And thank you for making time to talk with us."

"Your message said you were concerned about the impact of this disaster on Wizard-muggle relations, and given how much anger there still is under the surface towards magic in general among the Egyptians, I would be an idiot to ignore your concerns. I've spent some time in the Wizarding World, but not nearly enough to get a true understanding of how wizards react to natural disasters or things on a scale like this, things that have affected both magicals and nonmagicals. So if you have anything to share, I will listen carefully."

Rias sipped at her tea before going on. "I also have no idea how the local magicals view the non-magicals after all this and what they think of me and my peerage. I know that the Aurors saw my peerage in action and understand our spells are entirely different from theirs, so what do the common magicals feel about us devils? And what is being reported in your newspapers? I assume that Lighthouse Lane has its own local newspaper."

"I do believe my husband has proved himself to be anything but common, given how much he stepped up to help with this crisis," Fleur said, chuckling throatily as she looked at her husband.

While Bill and Charlie had volunteered from the start to help Harry from the moment Harry arrived in Egypt and had been at the forefront of some of the fighting, Fleur had seen only action during the initial battles in Alexandria and had since been staying in Lighthouse Lane. Since then, Fleur had helped manage the flow of magical supplies coming through the Floo Network, working alongside one of the Indian Aurors. She had also been keeping a subtle eye on the general mood of the locals. As a Veela, she had a slight empathic skill and could tell how the wind was blowing better than Bill. It had been Fleur who had pushed to reach out to Rias.

Now, the look of admiration in the woman's eyes for her husband caused Rias to smile, and she wondered idly if she looked like that when she spoke about Harry. Deciding she probably did, Rias' smile widened a little before she shook herself and continued more seriously. "True. But you asked to meet with me for a reason. How bad is it?"

At that, the married couple, which for a moment had looked as if they were going to float off into their own world for a bit, came back to the here and now, the look they were exchanging shifting into one that was not romantic in the slightest. Rather, it was worried, very worried. "There is a tremendous amount

of shock right now among the populace of Lighthouse Lane. The local newspaper, *Ancestral Etchings*, has run three articles since the start of this crisis, and only the last one was anywhere near the truth. The first tried to downplay events out in the nonmagical world, saying it was just a spot of bad luck that a natural disaster occurred at the same time as a magical disaster, with no basis in fact whatsoever. It was soon proven false.”

The French woman’s voice sounded a perfect mixture of condescending and loathing, and Rias wondered if she’d ever had any political training. Her voice would’ve been a magnificent tool. “The second article was closer to the truth: that two ancient wizards had unleashed war upon Egypt and that the Interdict had been put in place to keep the secret from getting out. You understand, Ma Cherie, how important ze Statute of Secrecy is to wizardkind, yes? It is almost a religion among us. Even I ‘ave to admit to being... *déconcertée* (disconcerted) by how openly magic is being used out past Ligh’ouse Lane.”

“I understand that, but I had hoped to hear that working so closely with the nonmagicals had begun to mitigate the fear that the collapse of the secret would cause war to break out. I get the impression that’s not the case...” Rias trailed off as both older magicals shook their heads.

“It hasn’t worked out that way,” Bill affirmed. “Or rather, it hasn’t among the normal wizards and witches. Among the Aurors involved in the fighting, there’s a distinct sense of ‘we’re all in this together’, and many of the first responder witches and wizards feel much the same. But... the problem is, those people are used to going out into the nonmagical world and interacting with non-magicals. In fact, most of them are muggle-born. They’re used to the fact that non-magicals outnumber wizards so much. A lot of the volunteers haven’t ever been into the nonmagical world before, and the reaction among them is bad.”

Bill paused, one hand rising to tug at his Dragon fang earring, an affectation that he’d had for more than a decade now, even though he had pretty much outgrown the bad boy stage of his life. “Look, most magicals look down on non-magicals to varying degrees. My family is considered ‘light side’ in terms of our politics. Rather than traditional or dark, it means we view non-magicals as having rights and being people. That’s not the same as believing they are equal to wizards or having any understanding of science, engineering, and so forth. Hell, I’m one of the most well-traveled among my family, and I can tell you flat I was still astonished at some of the things I’ve seen out in Egypt since I started to work with Harry. That’s eroded any sense of superiority the common wizard felt.”

“Which only means zat ze other side of the Statute of Secrecy, ze fear that was part of why ze Wizarding World separated itself, has grown,” Fleur said, taking up the tale. “You have people like my souer (sister) who have seen **thousands** of people coming zrough zeir makeshift hospitals with no let up. You ‘ave Aurors telling tales of fighting alongside ze Egyptian military, proudly exclaiming how they worked alongside one another. Not understanding that hearing about how a, a ‘mitrailleterie’ (machine gun) can throw out so many bullets as to break down a Protego is not something zat normal magical wants to hear, even most muggle-born. Then we have had a few flash incidents, where crowds of people waiting for food lost zeir tempers and began fights, and how the witches and wizards had to use stunning spells. Only to see zhose spells absorbed by the sheer bodies of the people around them, and ze mob simply rolls over zhe witches and wizards until help arrives.”

Bill shook his head, the married pair switching up who was talking with the ease of long practice. "At the moment, the shock of it all is more prevalent than the fear by a small margin, but as more time goes on, and as the muggle side of Egypt starts to slowly recover? There will be a lot of questions and a lot of fear. Both of which will circle around how to put the Statute of Secrecy back in place, how to stick our heads back in the sand and ignore the tremendous amount of damage that was done to the nonmagical world by two magic users."

Fleur once more spoke, although this time, she leaned forward, and her voice became almost crotchety, almost but not quite masculine. Rias was more amused that her accent had disappeared, frankly. "After all, they weren't normal witches or wizards. They were obviously two Dark Lords. Let Harry Potter handle it. That's what he's for, right? He's practically a dark Lord himself, being a werewolf and so ready to kill in his war against Voldemort." She straightened up even as her husband applauded her mimicry with gentle handclaps. "Zhe more zings change, ze more zey stay the same."

"That's one thing, but ze fear of the muggle world is another. We're..." Fleur shook her head, her moment of disgust and levity fleeing to be replaced by deep concern. "I am seeing three camps forming. One that wants to be subtle about things, to convince the muggles that for ze good of the world, the monstre (monster) must be put back in the bottle, and do everything we can to remain friends. Zhe other doesn't care about goodwill, only speed. Ze Statute needs to be put back in place as fast as possible. Zey don't necessarily want to cause more deaths but would be willing to look the other way if it happens among zhe muggles if it helps secure the secret of the Wizarding World. Then there are the Indians, who are not trusted by the locals and who seem to be keeping their own council. I cannot get a feel for what zey are thinking."

"And the worse is that, even with all the foreign Aurors that were transferred into Egypt before this disaster began, common civilians still outnumber them. Similarly, muggle-borns, who make up the majority of the first camp, are a minority in the Wizarding World," Bill explained further. "I'm worried about what might happen when the wider Wizarding World realizes how badly the Statute's been shattered here in Egypt."

Rias sipped at her tea again, although the enjoyment of the beverage had faded. This, this did not sound good. *I didn't realize how badly the wizards and witches would want to return to the status quo. I had hoped that we would be able to peacefully bring the wizards into whatever plans we make going forward, but the Wizarding World needs to understand that it simply can't bury its head in the sand any longer. It needs to become aware of the Three Factions, as well as the Khaos Brigade. It also needs to start to treat the non-magicals as equals! None of that MACUSA nonsense, where they have plans in place to mind-control large swaths of the local government. I'm glad we at least can count on the Indian and Japanese groups, but even so...*

Suddenly, Rias realized that the married couple had fallen silent and were now looking at her speculatively. "I'm sorry, I was lost in thought for a moment. Do, do either of you have any ideas to overcome some of that fear? "

"It's become known that you are the leader of the Oriental magicals and that you've taken over leading all of us magic users in this crisis thanks to your relationship with Harry Potter," Bill said, shrugging his shoulders in apologizing, knowing how that sounded. "If you could maybe make a statement through

Ancestral Etchings, that could help here in Lighthouse. Maybe tell people how the Statute of Secrecy will be maintained, and a vague timeline for when it would be accomplished?”

Rias blinked, her thoughts derailed for a second. “The way you say that, it sounds as if your fellow witches and wizards think I lead mainly because of my connection to Harry. They **do** know I am a devil, right? None of us have made any attempt to hide our heritage from the start of this disaster. At the very least, I’m certain a lot of people have seen Akeno, Mittelt and Kala’s wings.”

Fleur winced a little, and Bill again took to tugging at his dragon fang earring, looking away from Rias. For a moment, it looked as if neither was going to answer given how embarrassed they both looked, but eventually, through some kind of marital judo made up by glances and facial twitches that were impossible to pick up by outsiders, Fleur spoke up. “Unfortunately, Ma Cherie, those zree are seen as simply some kind of example of Oriental Veela. You are seen as a scion of some kind of famous Onmyouji house with access to ancienne (ancient), powerful magic. Everything you and zhe others have done has been simply attributed to Onmoyodo-style magic. No one who has not seen Akeno or zhe others in action believes you represent a different magical community or zat you are actually devils. And those who have are not believed. ‘Some kind of glamor’ is a common thought, no matter how experienced zhe Auror in question is.”

“Which doesn’t even bring into the conversation the reaction to Tiamat and Yasaka,” Bill snorted. “Tiamat is simply a powerful oriental sorceress who somehow created the Animagus dragon form, while Yasaka is seen as an oriental mistress of illusions. Which I understand she is, but even so, that’s an example of even a stopped clock being right once, if ever there was one.”

“...” For a moment, Rias was silent, and then she sighed, shaking her head. “That takes the idea of sticking your heads in the sand to a whole new level. I hadn’t realized that the willful ignorance among your folk would spread that far.”

“My wife is being a little too harsh there. There are a lot of people who know you’re devils, that angels exist, and so forth among the Aurors. People like Proudfoot are well aware of the sheer scope of your powers and of Asia’s Miracle.” Bill prevaricated, waving his hand this way and that. “Which is far, far beyond anything any wizard or witch could ever pull off. But even among those people, many just assume you will believe the same as them, that the Statute needs to be maintained. And thus ignorance remains in the minds of the common wizard or witch.”

Rias frowned at that, tapping her lips thoughtfully. “And the best way to combat ignorance is information. Which brings us back to the idea of posting an article in your local paper.”

“If you are thinking of announcing your presence as a devil, I would do it from zhe perspective of how alike devils are to humans. I realize it might sound distasteful, but you need to lean into zhe rumors that you all are just Oriental-style Veela. At least to start,” Fleur offered hesitantly.

“No, that would give them away to compartmentalize what we are without realizing the full extent. I think perhaps the best thing to do would be to introduce myself.” Rias scowled, shaking her head slightly. “And then do a personal piece about how Harry and I met and how he became involved with one another. That will show my individual side, and when they read about my family and learn that I am a Devil and about the Devil Faction, the more discerning among your folk will read between the lines and realize that the Wizarding World had no knowledge whatsoever about us. From there, a piece about the



Three Factions and our history, how we have hidden ourselves as you have, will do. Make that one a bit drier, I think. Something for Kalawarner to work on.”

Kalawarner was stationed within Alexandria and its surrounding environment, helping out wherever she could but generally staying in the same territory, unlike Mittelt, Akeno and the others who had recovered from the actual conflict of the Egyptian disaster. Kala’s concerns about Asia had caused the woman to refuse point blank to be sent anywhere else. Given the fact that Asia had injured her very soul, Akeno and Rias had both allowed this, even though Asia was now safe in Danan with Harry and the others.

“The first would probably draw people in, but I don’t know if the second is a good idea. You don’t want to make people more afraid of you... Or do you?” Bill asked, confused.

His wife, on the other hand, was nodding thoughtfully. “You wish to both impress zhem with your power but also remind zhem zhat you are just as ‘human’ as any. I think zere are several things you need to leave out of such information, though. Specifically, how many devils there are, the full extent of your powers, and the existence of the Underworld.”

The French-born Veela had learned of the Underworld and the whole pocket dimension concept when Harry had told the Egyptian branch of the Weasley clan about his adventures with Luna in Danan and about Rias and the rest of his now-greatly expanded family. She’d had to get used to the idea before everything went to hell, a thought that now brought a faint uptick to a corner of her mouth. “There are many things that the common wizard or which will accept as a matter of course. The existence of entirely different dimensions is not one of them. They would sooner believe that an entirely different magical society was able to hide from them than that. After all, we hide from one another all the time.”

“All right. That sounds like a good starting point, I think. And it will even help once we are back in regular contact with the rest of the Wizarding World.” Rias scowled a bit. “While I’m happy that supplies have kept flowing, I’m not so happy about how the ICW’s Chief Mugwump hasn’t reached out to us officially yet. I realize that governments move slowly at times, but this is a crisis situation. Worse, the flow of supplies Hermione procured and the Indian Aurors show us they know what’s going on here.”

“I have a suggestion of my own: have Hermione do the write-ups for you for the local papers. She’s a known quantity and one of the top twenty spellcrafters in the world. While a personal piece and a historical article won’t be in her normal purview, she’s a known name and one who will be respected much more than a reporter.”

“My husband is correct. Hermione would be a major help zere. So long as Padma is around to keep zhe articles to a certain size,” Fleur added dryly. All three of them chuckled at that, even Rias having gotten to know Hermione well enough to know that she was quite verbose if allowed to be. “But what exactly are you setting zhe foundation for?”

“Hopefully? An open dialogue between the Wizarding World and the Three Factions. The Three Factions were just as ignorant of the Wizarding World for the most part as you were of us before Harry and I met. Only high-ranking members of our people knew about your world at all, and we can’t get through your wards. Any conflict between us would be destructive, carried out in the nonmagical world for the most part. Earth really doesn’t need that right now,” Rias answered bluntly. “But you also all need to understand where we, that is, Harry and I, stand when it comes to the non-magicals hearing Egypt.”

“And where do you stand?” Fleur asked, trying to keep her own voice neutral. While she wasn’t as fanatical about it as many wizards and witches were, she still firmly believed in the Statute of Secrecy. The long-term ramifications of what was going on here in Egypt were horrifying to her.

Rias examined the pair across from her thoughtfully, then mentally shook her head. Now was not the time to bring up specific long-term plans. “I don’t know specifics yet about our plans going forward,” she lied. “All I do know is that any attempt by the wizards and witches to try and Obliviate and put a story in place across all of Egypt is doomed to failure. Your attempts will be noticed, and the story eventually debunked. You’d have to station hordes of Obliviators in Egypt to keep people from noticing the discrepancies, and there’s no way you could catch everyone. Panic, backed up by a lot of anger, most particularly among the Egyptian troops which we have fought and been working so hard alongside.”

*Even someone like my brother would have trouble blanketing a country like Egypt with a memory erasure spell. And there’s no way even Nii-sama would be able to do so with any subtlety, not enough to last more than a few weeks. Which isn’t considering all the physical evidence, the huge numbers of dead or anything else!* Rias mentally added. “We need to find another solution.”

“There’s another aspect that you might not be aware of, love,” Bill said, taking his wife’s hand and bringing it up to kiss the palm of it in a move that made Rias wonder if that was where Harry had gotten that gesture from. “While the common wizard or witch might be thinking along those lines, the muggle-born won’t be. And neither will a lot of the Aurors, be they European, Indian or Oriental. Even if ordered to, a lot of the folk who fought alongside the Egyptians would refuse any such order. They’ve made acquaintances, even friends, among the non-magicals we’ve been working alongside. They’re not going to just turn around and let other witches and wizards Obliviate them like that.”

“Exactly. So we need to stop any push in that direction before it can get going,” Rias said firmly.

Fleur wrinkled her nose, an expression that even Rias admitted looked cute on the other woman’s face as she considered before saying simply, “It will be an uphill battle.”

“We’re getting used to those,” Rias answered with a shrug.

The conversation continued for a few more moments as they worked on a basic outline of the articles Hermione would write out, including how long they should be, just in case. These would be followed up on by Ramagupta, perhaps, explaining how the Indian magicals had long been in loose contact with their own deities. How that would be taken, none at the table could guess, but hopefully, knowing that wizards and gods could live while knowing about one another would be a good thing. The other aspect that the Statute would, in some fashion, be put back in place would also calm fears on the WW side of things. Whereas Rias hoped that her own plans for the future would help at least offset the anger still boiling under the surface in the nonmagical population of Egypt.

It was around twelve by the time the conversation finished, and the married couple walked Rias to their door.

Which opened before they could get to it. A second later, Gabrielle came in from outside, her welcoming call falling silent as she stared at Rias. The two of them had not interacted much since Rias had come through from Darcy, and both of them had been more than happy with that state of affairs. “Oh, it’s you. What are you doing here?”

“Gaining much-needed information about the local wizard population,” Rias answered glibly, then, deciding to firmly bury the hatchet, she held out her hand. “I wanted to thank you for dealing with that incident at the hospital the other day. That could have gone very, very badly for everyone if the wizard abusing the patients hadn’t been found and stopped so quickly.”

Gabrielle stared down at the hand, the hand that held the ring that signified Rias’s marriage to Harry, and for a moment, simply scowled as she stared at it before throwing her shoulders back and taking the hand, shaking it firmly. If Gabrielle tried to squeeze the hand so hard that it looked as if she was trying to break fingers, Rias didn’t comment. “The putain deserved being turned into a torch even before he opened his mouth and tried to explain his actions as only being against non-magicals.”

Like her sister had done earlier, Gabrielle attempted to make your voice sound masculine for a moment, although instead of crotchety, in her case, she went fo whiny male rather than elderly. “It’s not like they are actually losing anything important, and I use contraceptive charms!” Gabrielle’s voice turned back to normal as she went on rolling her eyes. “that is what he said right before I turned him into a bonfire.”

“Still, I thank you for it. Far too many people would have either not noticed what he was doing or been willing to turn a blind eye because he was such an accomplished healer.” The man in question was the most senior healer in Egypt prior to his immolation and had probably saved more lives than women he had taken advantage of. “Yet I would rather do with the loss of a healer than letting such as that occur,” Rias stated firmly.

With that, she released Gabrielle’s hand and made to walk around the woman. “Now, if you’ll excuse me, I have other meetings tonight, unfortunately.”

Staring at the redhead, Gabrielle wanted to reach out to the woman, to grab Rias, to shake her, to demand answers as to why, with all of the flirting she’d done via letters and pictures, Harry had never seen Gabrielle in the same light that he had apparently come to see Rias in a far shorter time. Gabrielle wanted to shout at the woman, to yell how Gabrielle hated Rias for usurping the position that Gabrielle had long desired.

But she didn’t. Gabrielle had seen Rias with Lily when she first came in with Lily from Danan and had seen the love and concern Rias had towards the then-conscious Harry, as well as the affection she held towards the other women in Harry’s life. And Gabrielle knew herself far too well to believe she could ever share. No, Harry Potter had moved on from Ginny, not just with Rias, but with Akeno and Kala. And if Gabrielle’s conversations, stilted as they were, with Isaac were to be believed, there were several others too. Her Knight in Shining Armor was not all she had thought him, and although Gabrielle would probably never get over her dislike of Rias, it was time and past time to move on from her one-sided desires for Harry Potter.

Rias nodded to the other young woman once more, then smiled and thanked Fleur and Bill for the tea before leaving Lighthouse Lane.

Sending one of her bat familiars out to her white-haired Rook, Rias learned that Koneko was still working at the airport but would be done shortly. Deciding to use the time wisely, Rias sent another bat out to Sona and then went to do something she had wanted to ever since helping to organize it: check in on the group of locals handling the orphaned or homeless children.

Of which there was a disturbing amount. Most of the children who could told the same tale of fathers who had given their lives for their children to leave their homes as those homes collapsed. Of parents who fought to the last side by side. Worse were the children left behind by parents who had fallen to the Faith-based trap that Akhentan's pillars had created. Leaving behind babies or toddlers too young to have built the Faith that would have opened the Ba (soul) to be drained away along with the rest of their life force, the sheut, the ka, the Ib and the Ren.

Yet, for all the horror these children have faced, the workers who were in charge of overseeing their care were remarkably upbeat. Despite the fact that it was pushing midnight by this point, and work was still keeping them up, messing with their sleep schedule. Then again, given everything, every adult in Egypt could probably say the same thing. But despite that, the married couple were still floating along, and that had everything to do with the help they were getting from a magical side of things.

"Those house elves, they are a gift from Allah!" The slightly rotund man who, along with his wife, headed this aspect of the recovery exclaimed, raising his hand to touch his forehead as he did. He was apparently a well-known lawyer in Alexandria who dealt in child abuse cases, while his wife had originally run an orphanage. The orphanage she had run had been smashed at some point during the initial battles here in Alexandria, but she had gotten most of the children out. The pair had been recommended by the Wife's Officer Club. A group of married women whose menfolk were in the Northern Military Region had created a remarkable gossip network.

The pair ran the orphanage from one of the more palatial estates within the city, whose owners had not survived. It was large but still crowded, yet the pair had organized food, medical care, and clothing for all the children within. Actual care came from a small, dedicated group of mothers who had volunteered for it for various reasons and the house elves whose praise the pair were currently singing.

"We have only a few house elves stationed here around the clock, but more pop in occasionally whenever they can to help. All of them are magnificent with the children and seem to enjoy working with them. If we did not have them, we would need to find cooks and nurses and would have a major problem in terms of clean clothing," the former lawyer expounded. "Specifically in terms of diapers."

"I don't suppose you know how we could hire a few of them full-time?" His wife added wistfully. "Even if they had to remain in hiding and hide their aid, they would still be a major help once I get my orphanage back up and running normally."

"I am honestly wondering the same thing," Rias laughed before going on apologetically. "But I'm afraid that at least part of a house elf's payment comes in the form of magic, feeding off the magic of a household."

Rias really was thinking about that and how house elves would be a major help in the future. *Not just for when I make good my promise to myself about Harry and I have children on the Isle of Fand, but they could even help in the Academy that Harry and Sona were talking about setting up in Kuoh. So much has happened since then it almost feels like another lifetime ago. But we can't let this crisis, or the hunt for the people behind it, stop us from thinking about the future.*

"But I'm glad they are helpful to you. Are you getting enough food or other supplies? The House-elves can only help so far if they don't get ingredients, and as far as I know, they don't have any medical type magic."

When the two answered in the affirmative but pointed out that several families who had collected their kids might still need help, Rias wrote out notes on that score to pass on to Sona. She and her peerage had completed the first mission they'd been given, and Sona was currently back in Alexandria, hence why Rias had invited her to help with interrogating Kuroka instead of Akeno. *I could have asked Kala, but she's not in the right frame of mind right now.*

As for Sona, when Rias had gone to meet with Bill and Fleur, she had been familiarizing herself with the ongoing organizational efforts. Rias estimated she would be up to speed by the time dawn began, and that would take more of the burden off Rias, letting her devote even more time to creating teleportation tunnels going forward.

"And what about the two golems? Have they been helpful? Have you had any trouble from anyone trying to take advantage of the kids?" Rias asked once she was finished taking names and addresses down.

The middle-aged couple exchanged a glance, and the woman spoke up. "Honestly, I was a little leery about the golems. Once things began to settle down, there didn't seem to be any trouble from riots or anything else running over our orphanage. I didn't see the point to them. But I have to say, some of them, especially the ones who can speak, are extremely well-liked by the kids. Don't ask me why."

"It's simple, my dear, as I've said before. The golems look like giant robots, and what young boy doesn't like the idea of having a giant robot protector around," her husband quipped, causing the woman to roll her eyes.

But Rias reflected there was probably a good deal to that. *I can still remember my surprise when I learned that Kiba didn't want to play with my dolls but would rather play with my Gundam collection, she recalled fondly. And he was a preteen, whereas most of the kids here are younger.*

"And as for trouble, we've had a few people come by and attempt to pick out kids for undoubtedly nefarious reasons. But they didn't have proper identification, or the kids, for the most part, didn't seem to recognize them. Of those that did, many did not want to go with their father or even their mother at one point." The woman sighed, shaking her head. "We've been able to stave off that kind of thing by simply stating we're worried that the children won't be able to get enough food if they are with their families elsewhere in Alexandria rather than here, and that seems to be holding for now against those who the children recognized."

"And when several of them began to get belligerent, the golems were easily able to scare them off," her husband finished.

"Have you kept a list of... of course you have," Rias changed what she was going to say as the man withdrew a folder from his desk, waving it slightly in the air. "Good. That will be something for the local authorities to follow up on once everything is as back to normal as it's ever going to get."

With that, Rias made her exit, but before leaving the massive mansion, she stopped to look in at some of the kids and check in on the two golems. One had been stationed by the door, but the other she hadn't seen yet in her visit. Strangely enough, the golem question, one of the most advanced, made by Akeno, Kala and the dwarves in Danan, was sitting on the ground, surrounded by kids.

In the light of the pale moon above, Rias took in the golem. It was large, one of the larger varieties, with large spherical shoulders and built-up forearms. Both arms ended in articulated hands, but Rias knew the

back of the forearm could pop up and show the golem's 'gun', crystals that had soaked up her Power of Destruction. Dwarven runes in gold lined its shoulders and waist, which were much smaller than its chest and shoulders, the lower body also being a bit smaller than it should be in comparison to the upper body. To either side of the golem's chest were two large green crystals, glowing very lightly in comparison to the golem's small orange eyes. Its head was very small in comparison to its shoulders, set in a small recess lined in the front with a grill.

All in all, it should have looked dangerous and maybe even scary. But the children clustered around it in blankets and sleeping bags didn't seem to think so. Many of the children were asleep, but several of them were still awake, listening as the golem read a story to them. His voice was a mechanical rasp, and yet, even so, the children didn't seem bothered by it at all. "Twelve year old Zet stood outside a tall, narrow gate in the Artisan quarter of Thebes (MYSTERY OF THE EGYPTIAN AMULET: Kids Ancient Adventure)."

Smiling at the sight, especially of two twin boys curled up in the golem's lap, Rias turned aside, flying up into the air and away. It was very clear that the kids were in good hands, lots of them. *I have to wonder about the golems, though. That one looked almost alive. That could be interesting to look into in the future.*

Having already sent out messages to Sona and Koneko to meet her at the hotel when they could, Rias was pleased to see her timing had been good, and both of them were waiting for her outside. "It's past time that we start questioning Kuroka, Koneko. I want to get her impressions on at least the two behind all of this while meeting them fresh in her head. We're not going to try and torture information out of her, but we don't know what kind of magic is involved in keeping the Khaos Brigade's secrets or how it works," Rias warned Koneko, putting an arm around the younger girl's shoulder.

Koneko nodded, leaning into the touch for a moment. "Understood, buchou. I think my sister will cooperate as much as she is able to. But please stop if it looks like she's in pain."

"I promise," Rias agreed quickly. "I don't want to hurt Kuroka either, Koneko. I just want to make sure we get as much information out of her as we can. We hadn't heard anything from that monkey Youkai we captured, so we have no idea how the Devil/Fallen united front is working against them. So any information we can get out of her is good."

Moments later, the three of them were sitting across from where Kuroka lounged out on a sofa. She still wore the chains that Hermione had put her in, and the door had been locked and reinforced from the outside. A Shinsengumi had also worked with a member of the Himejima clan to put down wards that would keep Kuroka from trying to escape, bouncing her back inside should she try to cross the wards.

If Kuroka still had her Senjutsu or even her normal magical powers such simple means would never have been able to keep the powerful Nekoshu captive, but while Kuroka looked much better now than she had when Koneko and the others first found and rescued Kuroka from her jail cell in the pyramid under Amarna, that wasn't really saying much. The black-haired youkai still looked extremely weak and not all like her normal self.

A spark appeared in her eyes as the door opened, and the trio of Devils entered. "Shirone-nya! Have you come to visit your onee-chan, or is this a business visit?"

“Business, I’m afraid. I don’t suppose I need to, but I’ll ask anyway. You know who I am, right?” Rias asked, pulling up a chair and steepling her fingers as Sona did the same. Koneko made to sit on the other side of the sofa from Kuroka, making no move to get close but showing some support regardless.

“You’re the Gremory girl who took in my little sister. And the girl next to you is Sona Sitri. So is this where you break out the thumbscrews, nya?” Kuroka flopped back lazily, dropping the magazine she’d been reading to the floor. “So disappointing, nya.”

“Sorry about that, but given how busy we’ve all been, not all that much. And no, no thumbscrews. I doubt those would work even as diminished as you are now, and besides, at least one group of questions you should want to answer: the questions around Akhenaten and Nefertiti.” Rias shrugged. “Or don’t you want to help us hunt them down?”

The spark that had been there earlier in Kuroka’s eyes flared again, and a snarl appeared on her face. “Diminished, nya? That’s an interesting way of putting it. And yeah, I want some revenge. Ask away, nya.”

“We’ll start easily then. Before we do you want food? I’m sorry, I don’t know if they’ve been feeding you,” Rias asked.

“Meh, protein bars for the most part, so some food would be nice, nya.”

That didn’t take long to solve, although cup ramen was not that much better than protein bars, in Rias’s opinion. Still, once Kuroka – and Koneko, amusingly – had some ramen and makeshift sandwiches, Sona began. “Let’s begin from the beginning with questions about your past that probably won’t cause any kind of magic on you to respond.”

Kuroka looked up at that, startled, and Sona waved her hand. “Magical oaths are a thing, and we’re not so naïve as to think that the Khaos Brigade can survive so long without some means of making certain it couldn’t be betrayed to the authorities.”

The older Nekoshu still looked a little startled but frowned thoughtfully. “I don’t remember anything being done to me or giving my Oath or blood. But I do know I gave my word I wouldn’t betray Ophis. There was nothing magical about it, though... at least I don’t think so, nya. And even if there was, surely what was done to me by that bitch Nefertiti would have broken whatever it was, right?”

“Perhaps, perhaps not. As I understand it, magical Oaths like that do not care if the individual who has given them changes from one form to another. So long as magic exists in the world, you can be bound to the Oath,” Sona said clinically.

Kuroka snarled a bit, then shrugged her shoulders and went back to slurping at her ramen. “Well, whatever. We’ll see, I suppose, nya.”

“Then tell us why you ran,” Koneko said before either Sona or Rias could speak up, leaning forward. “Why did you leave me? When we met in that bar, you never explained. Only said you had to run and couldn’t bring me with you.”

That caused Kuroka to wince a little, but with nothing to gain by lying about it and neither of the older Devils looking as if they wanted to interrupt, Kuroka came clean about the reasons why she had slaughtered her former king and his peerage. How he had been experimenting on them, and how he had been about to start experimenting on Koneko.

Most of this Rias had already known. Her brother had eventually told her about his suspicions about Nebiros heir's death and how he had tried to stop the backlash. But Sirzechs hadn't had as much influence on Devil society at the time and hadn't been able to. The tale still served at least to clear the air a bit between the two sisters.

But once Koneko was satisfied on that score, if not for the fact Kuroka had joined the Khaos Brigade, Sona and Rias began to ask questions. Sona went first, gesturing out over the barre window outside to the nighttime cityscape beyond. "What kind of mind could see the horror of the Harvest was worth it, whatever the outcome? I have met Devils who would brutally rape a child regardless of gender for the sheer joy of the act. I have met Fallen, who reveled in destruction. But even someone like Kokabiel would look on this as, if not terrible, then at least wasteful. What are Nefertiti and Akhenaten like as individuals? How do they think? What is their goal? Power?"

Rias nodded. "Hermione told us what she could of the runic array she found in the underground pyramid. But we don't know if they gained enough power to become gods as they apparently wanted to. We need to understand how these bastards think to figure out what they will do next. The Earth literally cannot sustain another disaster like here in Egypt."

Although confused by how Rias had put that, Kuroka understood the point of that kind of broad start. Unfortunately, that didn't mean she could help much. "I don't know if I even met Akhenaten, and the woman I thought Nefertiti was, well, she proved to be a much better actor than I am a judge of character, nya. But as to what they are, they're obviously narcissistic. Whatever else, that's true, at least. But..."

Kuroka frowned, thinking. "But they aren't unthinking narcissists, nya. Nefertiti knew she had no chance against me in a fight. They both knew they had no chance against the powers in the world. I was a..." she scowled. "a target of opportunity. I think they are planners. Despite wanting power, Akhenaten and Nefertiti both value their lives over everything else. If they had stayed and fought against Shirone-chan and the others, they might have won. But knowing that Tiamat and Potter were out there, they ran instead. That tells me they're kind of cowardly, nya."

"Considering how many of their bound godly servants Harry and the others had gone through by that point, I can't say I blame them. But still, tell me more about the battle in which you were captured. Why do you think you were a target of opportunity?"

Kuroka sighed and began to explain, scowling ever deeper as she described how Nefertiti had befriended her. How they had been sent into Egypt, where Nefertiti had disappeared before laying out a trap that captured Kuroka in a pocket dimension without Kuroka noticing at first, then beating her down with her undead servants and Sobek. Rias and Sona pried at the story, in particular the runes used to entrap Nefertiti, then asked several more questions about the various interactions with the woman. But despite the many steps that went into capturing Kuroka, it was clear that not nearly as much planning went into it as had the rest of the twosome's plans in Egypt.

As they finished dissecting that aspect of what had happened to Kuroka, they segued into the ritual that had somewhat copied Kuroka's Nekoshu abilities into Nefertiti. That was fascinating for Sona, who took over all the questioning on that point, being much more interested in spellcrafting than Rias. Rias simply took notes, adding what they discovered to what Hermione and Akeno had been able to tell her in their



brief meetings since Rias had arrived in Egypt. The knowledge of ancient Egyptian magic wasn't good, but Rias found herself coming back to three points.

*One, if their knowledge of Egyptian magic included combat spells, then why didn't Akhenaten and Nefertiti stay and fight? They obviously felt that even with their new power up, they might lose. That's not just cowardice, but I think a lack of skill. But then, Hermione said the woman was also the... chief of Aurors for the ICW. So she can fight... if forced into it. Nefertiti had blown her disguise! She's not someone who will fight if there is any other way to get what she wants.*

The second point that bothered Rias she voiced the moment Sona was finished asking questions about the draining ritual. "Kuroka, you mentioned your time interacting with Nefertiti while you were both part of the Khaos Brigade. Why didn't either she or her husband try to manipulate Ophis to give them some of the Auroboros tattoos that she can give out like she did Diodora?"

"I don't know, nya. There aren't many of us who actually ask for those things, so it didn't seem all that important. But if I had to guess, I think..." Kuroka paused again, thinking back to her time interacting with Nefertiti. "I think they both, or maybe just Nefertiti, I think they both feel a, a loathing, a disdain for Ophis. Not like Cao-Cao does; he hates anything nonhuman, nya. But Nefertiti was kind of... not dismissive, but sneering in the shadows kind of at Ophis in particular, nya."

"That actually makes some sense." Rias looked at Sona, who shrugged. "If you are given power, that power is still that of the giver. Our peerage system allows for individuals to grow. The peerage system just gives them a leg up by changing them into devils or giving more power to those who join. How did those tattoos work?"

"Like an out-of-control battery," Koneko answered, the only one there who had seen them in inaction in person, a faint smile appearing on her face as she remembered making soup of Diodora's skull at the end of the battle. "I remember what those tattoos looked like when Diodora called on them. It wasn't pretty, and while he was using them, Dio-aho wasn't the source of their power."

"Hmm...that makes sense. And given how much effort Akhenaten and Nefertiti put into the Harvest here in Egypt, it stands to reason that this pair might have thought that they could achieve such heights by themselves," Rias mused. "My second question specifically about Nefertiti is, and no offense, Kuroka, but why didn't she kill you? There are other Nekomata in the world. There are even other Nekoshu in the world beyond you and Koneko. So why?"

"...huh, come to think of it, the idea she needed to keep me around just in case she needed to drain me again doesn't make much sense, does it, nya?" Kuroka hummed, scowling. "I don't know the real reason if it isn't a case of her just not thinking about it, nya."

Sona frowned, mentally going over the notes she'd made of the ritual. "I wonder. You said that Nefertiti mentioned it was the first time that she used that ritual, right? That she had made it herself. It could be because she didn't know the long-term effects..." Sona's eyes widened. "In fact... Rias, do you have any idea how many people were not caught in what they called the Harvest?"

"I do. We aren't certain, but I think that Harry destroying so many pillars in the Potter Triangle and Asia's miracle between them saved somewhere between thirty and forty-four million within the Potter Triangle." That number had gone up as Rias expanded her network of teleportation tunnels and the

survey teams spread. "Beyond that, we think less than a million survived beyond where Harry's attempts to destroy the pillars reached."

Sona wasn't the only one to wince, but Rias simply gazed back at her, the gaze of a woman who had already dealt with the horror of that as best she could and was hoping to discover something that, if it could not make sense of the horror would at least give her an idea as to how to find the people who did it. "What's on your mind, Sona?"

"No one has ever made the jump straight from human to god before. Human to spirit, human to demigod, yes. Potter-sensei is a prime example of that. But Nefertiti and Akhenaten...they must have experimented, tested, and researched as much as they possibly could of every aspect of the Harvest in order to figure out what to do at every point, including how much power they needed to reach their goal of deification. But then along came Potter-sensei and the rest, messing things up. Cutting the Harvest by at least half. I have to wonder if they left that much leeway in their calculations."

"Ddraig?" Koneko asked, her arm glowing for a moment as the Boosted Gear flashed into being. "Anything you can tell us?"

**"I'm a dragon, partner, not a mage or wizard. I don't know anything much about how magic works. I just use it,"** Ddraig answered, the gem on the back of Koneko's hand pulsing with his words, which caused Rias to wonder how much of a difference there was between Dragon-type magic and Deific. **"And there are some hard and fast rules to what we can and can't do. But if you're asking what I sensed when we broke into the ritual chambers those monsters were using, they were definitely gods when they escaped."**

"Monsters? That's rich coming from one of the Dragon Gods, nya," Kuroka muttered, frowning and looking at Sona and Rias.

"But could they have sustained that power?" Sona murmured, thinking. "We know that part of a deity's power is based on Faith. But instead of using Faith as a long-term resource, these two drained that Faith and everything else from their victims. So, would they be able to keep all that power? Or would it drain away? Deific magic is different, just like a Fallen or Devil's magic is different from one another. You can't just gain power and cross that threshold, the line between humans and deities. It's much more difficult than that."

"Sona, I'm grateful you're here now, but I don't think having you help me keep on top of the organizational aspect of the relief efforts is a good use of your time any longer," Rias announced firmly. "Would you mind--?"

"Taking a group and head to Amarna to examine the runes and anything else we can find? Not at all. It's a long shot, but if it's possible that Akhenaten and Nefertiti didn't succeed, then we also can tell what they will be after from here on. More power," Sona interrupted, her tone both intrigued and grim. "I would like to take Tsubaki and Akeno and Ms. Granger if I can."

Rias grumbled. "Drat it, we don't have enough magical researchers to go around. Tsubaki is fine, but not Akeno just yet or Hermione. I want to have her and Padma work on something for Fleur on the Wizarding World side of things. Oh... we can try to get Momo and Reya to join you and your Knights here.

Maybe. Depending on when Lily next pops in and how good she and Luna are at convincing them to come to Danan.”

“Point. But for now, let’s get back to the subject in question.” With that, Sona turned back to Kuroka. Questions about Akhenaten passed quickly, as the Nekoshu didn’t have any idea who he was within the Khaos Brigade and hadn’t interacted with him during her incarceration in the underground pyramid. The same could be said for Nefertiti during that time frame, but Sona and Rias both questioned Kuroka closely on who else the woman had interacted with. The woman had interacted with several wizards, a few dozen mages, and maybe one other wizard who Kuroka thought was one of Cao Cao’s followers.

That made sense considering what Akeno had passed on to Rias about Harry’s run-in with Cao Cao and what he had told Harry about ‘Simon Maagh’, the identity Rias assumed Akhenaten had taken while interacting with the Khaos Brigade. Sona jumped on that, wondering, “So, how much influence could Simon have had on Cao Cao? Specifically, how much influence would Cao Cao not take notice of?”

“Very little. Cao Cao’s smart as a whip, despite how arrogant he is,” Kuroka answered bluntly. “He’d be quick to purge, or whatever you want to call it, any influence Akhenaten might’ve had over him. Unless it was something he really, really needed or wanted, anyway.”

Since Kuroka had no idea about what that could be, the questions shifted to what else Kuroka had noticed about Nefertiti, the underground pyramid and anything she might have seen but not realized the importance of at the time. This didn’t lead them anywhere new, though, and as Koneko left to get her sister more food, the genteel interrogation turned to the Khaos Brigade, specifically Ophis to start with.

Surprisingly to both Rias and Sona, the first few questions to elicit a response, despite the fact that all of them were about Ophis. How Kuroka had met the woman and what Kuroka thought about Ophis’s goals passed by easily. Of course, they had known what Ophis said her goals were, but to hear someone from the inside describe how dysfunctional the Khaos Brigade was in terms of actual direction, if not organization, was weird.

“Does Ophis even have any specific plans to open a gateway to the Dimensional Gap?” Sona asked, somewhat thrown off by hearing about how the Hero, Devil and other sects within the Khaos Brigade were so dysfunctional. *I realize they must have a lot of exceptionally dangerous individuals, but what does that matter if they refuse to work together unless Ophis is breathing down their necks?* “If I were her, that would be the first thing I would do. Only once I had secured the means to get to the Dimensional Gap would I begin to gather allies. She seems to have done the exact opposite.”

“Because she’s got no way of doing it in the first place. Ophis is strong, but she’s kind of ridiculously narrow-minded, nya,” Kuroka laughed, her single tail twitching to the side. “She’s got a lot of magic, sure, but Ophis doesn’t have any specific magic herself to travel across dimensions or into the Dimensional Gap.” She thought about it for a moment, then shrugged. “As for specific plans, the last thing I heard before coming to Egypt was that Le Fay might have come up with the idea to do that and that Ophis was still pushing forward with their plans to expand the strength of the Khaos brigade. She was going after magical items, I think. Things that she recognized somehow that were seen in museums worldwide, nya.”

Sona and Rias exchanged a glance at that, their minds running parallel for a moment.

Both of those statements were somewhat worrying, if in different ways. The idea that Ophis recognized any magical items that had been lost in the normal world was disturbing. What kind of magical artifacts would Ophis recognize? And as for Le Fay, it seemed as if, despite the magical Oath constraining her to keep Darcy a secret, the little Pendragon had discerned enough of the Undertaking to start to make some plans. That could be either good or perhaps remove Ophis, the reason why magic was overflowing Earth at present, from this dimension. Or it could be very bad, in that it could pull the Great Red into this dimension where any direct conflict would be apocalyptic.

Still, there is nothing that they could do about that right now beyond making a note of it, which Rias did. And as she did, Sona posed a question. "Now, to investigate the Khaos Brigade itself. You've mentioned the different sects and Ophis' goal. Let us get down to specifics. Where would the nearest Khaos Brigade base be from Egypt? Is it a recruiting base or a general hideout? Does the Kahos Brigade differentiate between types of bases?"

"I--GRKKK!!" The instant Kuroka opened her mouth to answer, she gagged as a blast of raw magical power burst out from her, blasting all three Devils away in various directions. This was accompanied by a feeling of row terror and awe as if Ophis herself had suddenly appeared, pressing all three Devils to the ground where they fell. An Ouroboros tattoo appeared around her neck. The thing came alive, writhing around her neck, crushing it as the mouth of the serpent moved up to her mouth, covering it with its green scales as the length of the snake around her neck tightened further.

Sona gasped, slumping forward, unable to do more than catch herself on her forearms, sweat breaking out on her face as she bent her neck back to stare up in horror and fear at the energy snake writhed around Kuroka. While a strong young Devil, Sona could not gather enough willpower to push through this horrifying presence. Rias, too, for all her recent powerup, was stunned and unable to gather her wits for a second.

Koneko would have been in the same position if not for Ddraig. "***Snap out of it, Girl!***" The Great Welsh shouted in her head. "***If you don't get moving, that tattoo's going to kill your sister!***"

The voice in her head galvanized Koneko, and she roared, summoning up the Boosted Gear again, shifting from the gauntlet form into the full plate form in an instant. "NO!!"

Gauntlets glowing with magic, Koneko leaped forward. She tried to grab at the scales of the energy creature choking her sister. Like the tattoos that had infested Diodora, the areas of the serpent she touched attempted to fight back, but the Boosted Gear's magic was able to overcome it at that point. The energy snake continued to writhe, still very much alive, and Koneko desperately tore more of it away,

The sight of this helped Rias concentrate, and with a snarl, she reached inside and pushed out her own aura. The red and black aura surrounded her, pushing away the fear being caused by the Ouroboros tattoo. Rias raised a hand, shouting, "Don't move Koneko!"

Her rook obeyed, and a second later, a small bolt of Power of Destruction surged through the head of the snake right from the side, passing across but not impacting Kuroka's face, whose eyes widened in shock. But the energy snake continued to choke the like out of Kuroka, another head reforming quickly. Rias responded with another bolt, followed by several smaller ones, aiming carefully around the spasming Kuroka and the fighting form of Koneko. *Koneko might survive a strike of Power of Destruction, but I'd*

*rather not take the chance*, Rias thought grimly as she fired two more bolts, using the trick her father taught her about teleportation circles to attack from every side.

Yet even though this quickly let Rias and Koneko destroy most of the energy snake, it reformed quickly. As a desperate Koneko tried to tear more of the energy snake again, Kuroka's spasming grew weaker despite the energy snake no longer constricting her throat, her eyes closing as she seemed to fall unconscious. This did not stop the energy snake. Instead, Kuroka's body seemed to be losing color, her scant magical reserves continuing to drain away to feed the thing. What would happen when they were gone the younger Nekoshu didn't know and didn't want to find out. "Do something!"

"I, I don't know what's powering it!?" Rias shouted, not halting her attack. "Diodora's body had a visible tattoo on it when I examined his remains, but--"

That was as far as she got before Koneko reached down and tore off Kuroka's shirt, exposing her upper body. She hadn't had a bra when captured by Nefertiti, and the ancient Egyptian sorceress hadn't seen the point of making up that lack. The next second, Kuroka's jeans followed, but no tattoo presented itself, even when Kuroka pulled one leg away from the other to look at her sister's inner thighs.

"Like I was saying, it looks as if Kuroka doesn't!" Rias stated, her tone torn between growing worry and a wild urge to giggle at Koneko's overreaction. "Whatever this looks like, it's somehow different at the same time!"

"Her tongue!" Sona shouted from behind them. The damage to the energy snake had broken the aura of fear that had pervaded the room eventually, but Sona had nothing to add to the combat against the thing, so had waited, analyzing what she was seeing. "It's got to be on her tongue or something inside her."

Koneko went to open Kuroka's mouth, holding her still with difficulty despite the Boosted Gear and her own Rook strength, but paused. "How, how do we remove it?"

Thankfully for both, Nekoshu Sona wasn't done. "If the thing reacts to Kuroka trying to answer a question about the Khaos Brigade, then what happens if she answers a question unrelated to them?"

With that, Sona shot out a bolt of water, the gentle ball bursting on Kuroka's face, rousing her. "Kuroka, where do you want to eat most in the world!?"

The nonsensical question seemed to take Kuroka aback as both Rias and Koneko froze, but then the older Nekoshu gargled out a response. "Tonkatsu-nya, a bowl as large as my tits."

As the answer left her lips, the energy snake began to dissipate, and she gasped, portions of the thing starting to disappear once more into Kuroka's barred body. Not willing to stop just yet, Sona asked another question, which Kuroka, now a little more awake, answered quickly. Two more went by until the last of the energy snake disappeared, and Kuroka shivered one last time before she slumped, almost falling off the sofa where she had bizarrely enough stayed throughout the turmoil.

But before she could, Koneko grabbed her, pulling the older girl into a tight hug, her Boosted form disappearing. Her ears flat against her skull, Koneko looked over Kuroka's head at the two Kings, growling, "No more questions. That was too close!"

“Agreed. It seems as if Ophis doesn’t care about keeping some things about herself and her goals secret, but I suppose there aren’t all that many secrets about her to know in the first place that could actually matter,” Rias grumbled, shaking her head. But the chaos brigade as a whole is a different matter.”

“I wonder who thought of putting that into some kind of magical Oath to Ophis to bind Kuroka. And how it was done without, wait, of course!” Sona exclaimed, looking over at Rias. “Memory charms, a specialty of wizards.”

Rias scowled, nodding. “Agreed. We’ve known that wizards and witches and even werewolves and vampires from the Wizarding World have joined the Khaos Brigade. It stands to reason that Ophis could call upon their specialties. Regardless, the actual enchantment was nasty. And so was the fact that none of our attacks or abilities could truly damage it in any way. If not for Sona’s quick thinking, Kuroka might have died.”

“I think while the shape of that magic comes from Ophis, the power behind it comes from Kuroka,” Sona agreed in turn. “Unless you’re somehow able to separate the two, she won’t be able to tell us anything about the Khaos Brigade. And if it is on her tongue, then how do we remove it?”

“All we can do is put Tsubaki in charge of figuring out a solution for now. Sorry, Sona, but I’ll give you Cú Cuchlain and Gasper instead in the morning,” Rias stated, causing Sona to roll her eyes but agree.

“Hermione and the others can join in when they have time, but they have other duties to see to first. But I want this followed up on. We’re sitting on a gold mine of information here, and I’m not going to let this Oath or whatever is from stopping us plum it to the utmost.”

Rias then sighed, shaking her head and standing up. “but for now, I think we’re done here. Koneko, you can stay with Kuroka for now, but I want you to get some sleep, too. Just remember to get her some clothing before too long, okay? Sona, I’ll loan you a few of my bat familiars. They’ll find Cú and Gasper for you. Goodnight.”

Sona snorted at that but said nothing, following the rapidly summoned bats out the door while Koneko curled up against her still-naked sister, hugging her as if the older girl would disappear if she let her go.

OOOOOO

Among the Three Factions, the Church was seen as perhaps the most ossified. It was the one slowest to change, slowest to admit its people were fallible, or to act on new information. But that was only true so far. They were also the only one of the Three Factions who could really operate openly throughout the world. This allowed the Church to have by **far** the largest following among humans, and even in the stratified construct of the Church, there was still room for growth.

They were also highly organized. There was a reason why the Church was at the forefront when it came to bringing in normal people or Sacred Gear users into their ranks, why the Church was on relatively good terms with the Hindu faith, with Buddhism on top of the Abrahamic religions. Human curiosity and a drive to always better themselves was why the Church had been able to come up with the weapons it gave their exorcists, weapons that could duplicate the Light Lances of the most holy Angels.

That desire to continually better themselves was also what had created the Holy Sword Project... although very obviously the Church made a mistake in who to assign as chief researcher there. Assuming innocence in their own priesthood unless it was literally thrown in their faces was a problem for the

Church, and the multiple layers of secrecy and trust which one had to jump through to move from the public Church to the more secret one, the portion of the Church that understood that magic was real, that Devils and Fallen existed, and so forth.

In the opinion of those in the know, that last had screwed the Church over royally in recent times. The case of Asia Argento would be a black mark on the Church for a long while. A Sacred Gear user like that thrown out of the Church due to the manipulation of a devil and the naïveté of the priests who had previously been watching over her. That was horrible luck.

In the opinion of many within the Church, Asia should have been brought into the exorcist program, or failing that, the Cardinal Points department, the moment her Sacred Gear had awoken. But it was policy of the exorcists to only care about Sacred Gears with combat potential, and, unfortunately, the Cardinal Points, which was the research department of the Church, had still been under a major cloud of suspicion at the time due to having missed Valper Galilei's corruption, and the horrible depths he was willing to descend to in order to recreate the True Excalibur.

That cloud of suspicion still existed to this day, hindering the Cardinal Points from top to bottom. Which was why two of the four Cardinal Points, the four Cardinals in charge of the department, were field agents. The other two were researchers. Now, at a meeting that occurred in the Vatican at around the same time that Rias was able to get some sleep, both researchers looked extremely worried as they stared at their two fellows.

Both of the field agents looked bedraggled in different ways. One of them was visibly badly wounded. His arm was tied to his chest in a sling covered with gauze from his fingers on up to his shoulder, and his eye and half of his face were equally covered in bandages. It was clear that those bandages continued under his simple habit, and several of his fingers were missing, along with his ear on that side, burned straight off his skull.

But for all of that, he showed more life than his fellow as he took a gulp of the sanctified wine, while the second field operative simply slumped into his chair, one hand over his eyes. The man who was visibly wounded had very obviously had some time to sleep, but this man just looked exhausted, as if he hadn't slept for days of high activity and was barely able to keep his eyes open now.

One of the two researchers was a young man. Indeed, he was the youngest cardinal in the whole of the Church, although he had been a member of the research team for years. Thin of body, thin of face, with large glasses, he looked a cross between ascetic monk and a programmer. He was also very blunt, so none of his fellows were at all shocked when the first words out of his mouth as the two field agents sat down was, "You both look like something a dog dragged through the mud."

"Sans the mud obviously," of the other researcher said, rolling his eyes at his younger fellows tact, or lack thereof. He was the oldest of the four, and was in fact the only one who had been part of this august body before the inhumane actions of Galilei and the Holy Sword Project came to light. He had spent several of the intervening years on sabbatical, getting in touch with God by living a simple life at austere monasteries across the world. He had come back for thinner, for more aesthetic and far more penitent than before. Although, he had never actually known what was going on with the holy sword project. He simply ran the archive department of the Cardinal Points, and was in charge of searching those archives

and the greater Church to find any information. none of the reports about the holy sword project ever touched on what was actually going on there.

But that had done nothing to assuage his guilt however, hence his time on sabbatical. "Still, I think we can all thank God and Haven that you are both still with us. I went to mass the other day to pray for the souls of the exorcists lost on your mission, Cardinal Musacheli."

Musacheli nodded, fingering his blasted face for a moment, shaking his head slightly from side to side. "I have done the same, but I'm thankful for your words. The loss of seven exorcists is a blow to the Church. That one of them was Vasco makes it even worse."

Even the exhausted man found the strength to wince at that. While none of them would outright say that one child of God was more important than any other, Vasco was easily the most powerful exorcist on the world, perhaps the most powerful true human in the world. Without any Sacred Gear, he had defeated numerous mid to high level Fallen and Devils in his time, becoming something of a legend among the exorcists. To hear that he had died in battle would be incredibly demoralizing to the entirety of the Church if it was allowed to get out.

Which it probably wouldn't, considering who had done the deed. There was no way the Church would allow the existence of a creature stronger than God to get out. "And you are certain it was the Dragon of Infinity?"

"Positive. She looked different from the records we have on her, but it was very definitely Ophis," Musacheli answered.

If these men were not churchmen all four of them would well have cursed at that point. "And we still don't know what she was there for?"

"The entire museum was destroyed in the battle, although it only began in the ancient antiquity section. I'm sorry, that's all I can tell you. She was just... **overwhelming!**" Musacheli shuddered in memory. "Vasco tried to talk to her, tried to convince her to let us go I think, but Ophis just simply waved her hand and..." Another shudder racked his body, and the battered cardinal shook his head. "And then I was outside, my arm pinned under some rubble, my face burning, and entire museum was burning in front of me."

The younger cardinal spoke up then. "Two of your exorcists were wearing video recorders, sending live data to one of the Church's satellites. Looking at the footage, she was near one statue in particular, that looked like a very ugly statue of a man merged into a dragon made by a toddler. I don't suppose that rings a bell?"

All three of the others, even the exhausted man stared at the archivist, who pursed his lips. "I'm afraid not. I would obviously need to consult our records, but it isn't something I can recognize offhand. And if it was in the ancient antiquities department, I assume that means it was before the time of Christ?"

When the others shrugged ignorance of that, the man went on. "Well, you know that our records are not exactly the best at such things. Especially if they have to deal with magical items."

Church had gone through several intervals of stagnation or decay. Sometimes they had a Pope who refused to believe in magic other than that which came from God, and who purposefully destroyed any



and all information about them. Or worse, a Pope who was motivated by secular authority. The Church had lost a good deal of ancient magical artifacts that had been won during the spread of the Church's influence in its early years due to them simply being melted down for the gems and expensive metals that they were made of.

The archivist could particularly remember a gauntlet from the time of Babylon which had been taken apart and its various jewels and gold used to help fund the Church's clandestine efforts during World War II. *Such a magnificent piece it was, too.*

"So we know that it was important enough for Ophis to come after purposefully, but not what it could do. Fantastic. Richard, do you have anything to add?"

The exhausted man shook his head from side to side as if that effort alone was enough to cost him all of his remaining strength. He slumped in his chair, and when he spoke, his voice was a raspy tired thing, the voice of someone who had spent not only several days away, but most of that time shouting. "I do not have anything to add on that score. My mission did not face any obvious Khaos Brigade interference, although perhaps the vampires we slew were? I have no way to know. The rest of the mission was difficult enough without that."

The others all nodded, with the youngest man there pushing across a sheaf of papers to Musacheli. He picked it up in his one good hand, reading through them quickly, speed reading being a requirement of any Cardinal despite what many people might think.

Cardinal Richard had been involved in the relief efforts going on in Venice. The city had been recently hit by a surge of water, not a real tsunami, which would have flattened the entire city, but waves up to five times their normal strength, accompanied by ground quakes. Richard had been there to help support the Church's public efforts, but Richard had also been there to retrieve several dozen magical items that the Cardinal Points had known were stored in St. Mark's Basilica there.

The report detailed his efforts, and how a coven of vampires had been attempting to use the chaos in order to gorge themselves at night. Richard and his two accompanying exorcists had stopped that in its tracks, but that and the official reason for them being there had obviously drained the man badly. Still, he had succeeded, and among the things he had gotten out were numerous records on the conflict with the other two Factions, things which were precious to the unofficial side of the Church.

Some life returned to Richard for a moment, and he pointed angrily at the younger man. "I got everything out, including that strange device you wanted!" he rasped. "Not only did one of your researchers grab it from my people the moment we set down in Ciampino. They didn't even bother to check in with me other than flashing their credentials. What was so important about that thing? We could have gotten at least ten more refugees out of Venice in the amount of space that thing took up, Furmos."

"I understand, and I'm sorry about that." The man called Furmos replied, pushing his glasses up his nose for a moment. "However, that device was something I had created while I was one of the researchers stationed in Venice. It is a Wide Angle Atmospheric Magi-dex Examination Device. I wish we could make more of them, as it would probably make finding Devils and Fallen far easier, but it was never there. In fact, I was castigated severely for going over funding to build the thing in the first place."

The other three all looked confused, about their conversation pause for a moment as food and water was brought in, simple fair, but wholesome. Both of the researchers made a point of pushing their own plates towards the exhausted man. After thanking them and saying grace, Richard fell upon the food like a starving animal. While Richard ate, Musacheli questioned Furmos now, asking politely what the device was supposed to do.

What followed was a long explanation, out of which both field agents took enough to pale a little. Because the device was powered by a block of sanctified uranium. They'd never even heard of such a thing before, sanctified weapons yes, the means to produce the weapons used by exorcists the world over were well known. But to use that process to bless a chunk of radioactive material?! That was beyond unusual.

Eventually, the archivist touched his younger fellow's shoulder gently. "Thank you. That was most informative. But I have to remind you that we are all on something of a time schedule today. You were very anxious to get that back into your possession, and you indicated that you might know why so many disasters were occurring the world over. Given what the device does, I take it you meet think that magic has something to do with it? A Sacred Gear in Balance Breaker mode perhaps, a equivalent of Dulio's Zennith Tempest?"

"No. Not that. But there is a theory called the Mystical Excess Combustion Theory, you see." Furmos decided to dumb it down a bit, and explained how if there was too much magic in the world, the physical bonds of that world would start to shift and even decay, resulting in a lot of damage. "We have seen numerous examples of more magic in the world these days, more spirits waking from their restless sleep, more unsanctified burials turning out zombies, the events down in Ireland. Although there at least the wizards seem to have done a bang up job of shutting that down."

Like the highly ranked Devils and Fallen, the Church knew about the wizard and world. Although they too were stymied by the by the Muggle repelling awards that covered the wizard and world. But unlike the Devils and Fallen, they had actually been able to bring the a few squibs kicked out of their magical families into the Church. Enough so that seeking out such and bring them into the Church was now policy, and Furmos had several working under him.

Unfortunately for the Church, being a squib did not stop someone from being affected by the Interdict. Like Oslo and Berlin, Egypt was still completely off the Church's radar.

"That device should enable us to figure out if that theory is accurate, or if it could be something else."

Hours later, after letting the two field agents rest, the Cardinal Points were once more call together, this time in Furmos' laboratory. What they saw on the giant computer screen dominating one wall was not good. First there was the image of the earth, currently showing tectonic movements as best the government of the world could track as well as where natural disasters had hit. And then, overlaid on that, was a reading of the background magic suffusing the world as shown by the device that Richard had rescued from Venice.

And on the table was a set of equations that none of the other three cardinals could follow, abut which had caused Furmos to look almost as pale as a ghost, his fingers trembling. "I worked it out. I worked out how much magic is flowing into the world per minute. I worked out how much has been dumped into the background magosphere. And given the disasters already occurring, I worked out how much more

magic it will take to create a cascade effect, the point of no return. I think we need to request an audience with our Holy God. Because at this point, we really do need a miracle, and if we don't get one within ten days, at this rate, we will be too late to stop the apocalypse."

OOOOOO

Unlike the four Cardinal Points, when he was informed of their findings, Michael understood instantly who was to blame for this. Ophis. Magic had been flowing into the world as long as she was in it, but Michael had not realized how badly that was affecting Gaia before this. Being at the center of the Heaven System was a full-time job: listening to prayers, answering a select few, communicating with the Church, slowly building bridges to the Fallen and Devil factions so that no large scale conflict could ever break out again. It was a lot for even an archangel, but Michael had to persevere. He was the one who sat on the Throne Of Heaven now, and the Heaven System would only answer to him, if in an extremely limited fashion.

*Really, no one but Father could control the full system, that is how it was designed. All I can do is keep it running, like a primitive human who has been told to go through a certain set of sequences to the point where he has it memorized to build a ship, but doesn't understand the underlying science,* Michael mused, before shaking that thought off.

"Please, thank your researchers for bringing this to my attention. We know who is involved in this, it is simply the act of finding them that is trumping even the powers of Heaven," Michael said into the picture pickup in front of him to the Pope. Even in an emergency like this, some decorum needed to be maintained, which included who could directly communicate with Heaven.

"What would you have the Church do?" the elderly pope, Boniface the X, asked.

"Put forth far more effort in terms of money and personnel to relief efforts," Michael announced answered instantly. "Now is the time for all of God's children to unite and come together. Let the Church lead in that action. Beyond that, I will be speaking with my counterparts among the Fallen and Devils. It is clear to me that neither of them are causing this, and thus the push to have peace talks gains a new impetus."

The Pope looked almost dyspeptic at that, but Michael went on smoothly. "We **know** it is not them causing this, as both of those factions live in this world as well, do they not? Your researcher says that even pocket dimensions connected to our realm will be affected by this soon."

The underworld was a pocket dimension, or rather a set of said dimensions, all interconnected into the Nine Hells as described in the Bible. Much like Hades, they were magical constructs reliant on Earth as an anchor.

Danan was not a pocket dimension. It was a completely alternate dimension, which was why going there was so much better for Le Fay's research into how to cross or enter the dimensional gap than simply going to the Underworld could ever be.

"That... makes some sense, but you realize we are still going to get a lot of pushback from the more militant voices within the Church?" While he was very aware of the balance of power, the Pope still needed to appease the more reactionary elements of the Church. He wanted to maintain the peace, but could not be seen to be unwilling to go to war.

“I know, and I am sorry for the position this puts you in. But I speak with Heaven’s authority in this. If this is a danger to the world, then those of us who live inside it **must** band together to do something about it, regardless of past differences. That is why I have been pushing for peace talks about the Khaos Brigade. If I was willing to set aside ancient wrongs to combat a boya foe, why would I not be willing to go even further to combat a possible apocalypse like this?”

The eight old human, Pope Benedict, winced at that, before bowing his head formally in supplication, something that the Pope would never have done to any human authority figure. But Michael was not a human authority figure. While the world might believe that the pope spoke with the Authority of God, it was Michael who spoke for Heaven and its legions. “As you say, your Holy Light.”

Moments after ending that call, Michael was calling Sirzechs, grateful that the two of them had been able to set up a means of communication before this. Indeed, the line of communication was much like the one to the Pope, and had been developed by the Church, the magical equivalent of a modern video call. That was a point of pride, although there was at least one advancement that the Devils had made in the past hundred years that heaven was **very, very** interested in acquiring for themselves.

Michael well understood that of the Three Factions, it was Heaven which was honestly the weakest after the Great War ended. Not only had God been slain, but so too had many angels, dying in the last battle. And unlike the Fallen, who just had to wait for angels to come to them or breed with humans, or Devils, who could breed with one another and humans, Angels could not renew their numbers. Over the centuries it was the humans who had been the true strength of heaven along with their alliance with the Hindu and Buddhist faiths. But the Peerage System that the Devils had begun to use before their civil war promised that perhaps Heaven could make up could begin to make up his losses, if Heaven could gain access to its inventor’s notes.

That was why Michael had decided to get behind the peace talks and push, although it had not been an easy or very popular decision.

*Still, if I have to work with Devils, at least most of them I do work with are likable enough,* Michael thought, smiling blandly into the pickup as Sirzechs’s image appeared. He looked exhausted, his face set into a grimace. “I’m sorry Sirzechs, did I call at a bad time?”

“It is never a good time to have an emergency. Which is the only reason you would be calling me in the first place like this bypassing all our normal diplomatic channels, such as they are. This is something I would have expected from Azazel, not you Michael,” Sirzechs said, shaking his head.

Michael had never called him like this before, not even to make certain that the communications devices they had all shared between one another worked.

“I am sorry to say this **is** something of an emergency, although it is not one that requires immediate action, rather immediate intelligence to confront,” Michael explained. “We have time, but not a lot of it.”

Sirzechs frowned at that, then shrugged before wincing again. It was very clear to Michael that he was in a good amount of pain. “Well, you at least have my attention.”

A second later, the image in front of Michael shifted, splitting in two as Azazel’s face appeared. Similarly, both Sirzechs and Azazel would be looking at two images now, creating a conference call. As the Fallen’s face appeared, Michael fought back both a frown and a sigh of sadness. He and Azazel had been friends

at one point in service to Father, but Azazel had been among the first to fall to the Sin of Lust, and ever since they had been enemies. The sight of Azazel never stopped bringing out mixed feelings in Michael.

“What’s the occasion, Mike?” Azazel drawled, smiling thinly, knowing precisely how his old compatriot viewed him and equally knowing that Michael would never be one to communicate with devil or Fallen like this if it wasn’t important. “Does it have anything to do with meeting we been trying to schedule about the Khaos Brigade?”

“It does, although only so much as talking about a matchstick would speaking about a forest fire be alike,” Michael said, before simply stating what the researchers in the Church had discovered.

As Michael spoke, Azazel’s manner shifted, and he leaned forward, tapping his finger against his lips thoughtfully. His eyes flicked over to Sirzechs, who did not look at all surprised, something Azazel was quick to call them out on. “You look as if you know something already about this Sirzechs, share with the class why don’t you.”

Snorting at that, then wincing again to the point where his head nearly bobbed out of the display, Sirzechs came back, rubbing at his face wearily. Nonetheless, he informed both of his counterparts what he had been up to recently. The fight in Hades against its master, the knowledge that Ophis’s very presence had begun to create a cascade effect that was now impacting the physical world, first relayed to him by Rias, then confirmed by Typhon, Gaia’s last son.

He followed this up by pulling out a sheaf of reports holding them in the pickup. “And these are reports telling me that we recently begun to see natural disasters throughout six of the nine levels of the Underworld. If Ophis is behind this, that is all the more impetus we need to push hard to find her, and somehow expel her from Earth. If that means shoving her back into the dimensional gap and letting her and the Great Red fight it out, or finding some way of removing her entirely from this dimension to another, I don’t care. But it needs to happen as fast as we can figure out how to do it.”

Azazel winced a little. His little corner of the Underworld, Incarnus, hadn’t seen any trouble, but that was obviously coming soon. “My attempt to track Vali failed. The Khaos Brigade still has resources including wizards, witches, mages and Fallen, and apparently were able to figure out that little trick before I could find out more than just a single base my asshole of an adopted son stopped at. Baraqiel lead in a talk force there, but there was nothing there, no records, no people. Just a trap, which thankfully, they were able to undo without any losses.”

“Similarly, we haven’t been able to get any pertinent information out of Bikou,” Sirzechs stated. “We’ve questioned him numerous times, but while he is open about some things, others are locked behind a Magical Oath that attacks him the second he tries to answer.”

“Yet you are the scientist here,” Michael rejoined, taking no pleasure in seeing his old friend/foe so annoyed as many humans would have. Such was beneath him, and he could acknowledge the brilliance Azazel showed toward his... Hobbies. “I realize your specialty is in Sacred Gears, but perhaps you could find some way to let us discover Ophis’s movements? She is able to get around far too easily.”

“Maybe if I had a scanner like the one your researcher did, and was able to get a reading on her specific magical signature. But I don’t. The world’s too big for us to think we can find her. I think we need to do something else. Try to draw her in.”

“You and Michael wants to do that fine. I’m going to be sitting this one out for a bit, and I am not going to ask any of the other Maou to step up and fight alongside you. My peerage took losses in the fight against Hades, and we have a new member to incorporate. *And the moment I can move without wincing and without my wife finding out about it, I’m going to head to Kuoh to figure out what’s going on with my little sister! Sona-chan might have said that she was fine, but I’m not going to believe it until I have my darling imouto in my arms again!*” “I think however, if the two of you are willing to work together on some kind of joint project to come up with a way to either dissipate the magic flooding into the magosphere or find Ophis, I can convince Ajuka to lend his expertise. He’d be able to play mediator too, since I know your various science departments would probably have a problem working together.”

Michael chuckled at that, while Azazel shook his head. “I would’ve never thought I’d ever see the day where Devils would play at mediators between me and Heaven.”

“Not them,” Michael opined, smiling faintly. “Or rather not just Devils. I think we also need to reach out to the powers in Kuoh. I realize we were going to use them as mediators at the peace conference, but I think we need to bring them in on this project too.”

Azazel grunted, scowling and looking away. He had attempted to analyze the wards around Kuoh several times over the past few weeks, but every time he did, those wards rejected him, with increasing levels of violence. He couldn’t even enter Kuoh at all to look around or meet with any of the people there in person, and the only one who he thought diplomatic enough to go in his stead, Baraqiel was very obviously not a good choice given the personal issues involved.

But like Michael, he had to acknowledge that the power in Kuoh was now while still being connected to the Devils, truly a separate power of its own right. At one point it might have been merely Devils, or perhaps even merely Devils and Youkai. *Buts with wizards in the mix? It was like an alchemical reaction. Bringing all the ingredients together had created an amazing whole.*

“I will serve as mediators between this research project of yours and Kuoh when the time comes. For now, I would suggest you both get that joint research team up and running as fast as possible,” Sirzechs suggested.

The other two found that agreeable, and after a moment of awkward hesitation, Michael simply nodded, said, “We will need to be in touch more in the future to set a physical means for our scientists to talk to one another. I will work on a list on my end of people to put on such a joint project and you do the same on yours. When we both have lists of people we want on the project, we can send it over to Ajuka via Sirzechs. Until then, farewell.”

With that, Michael abruptly cut the connection, leaving Azazel and Sirzechs to look at one another. But they too didn’t say much, and soon the call ended, both leaders now having yet another thing to worry about.

OOOOOO

Unfortunately for Rias, those few hours would prove to be quite fraught for a lot of other people in Alexandria...

Sala had come back from Damanhur, taking command from Abraxas to let the other man get some sleep. Thanks to Yasaka’s show of force, all of the ‘organizational’ problems plaguing him in that city had folded

like a stack of cards. With that, and Yasaka staying out there along with Koba, who had essentially been permanently assigned to Damietta for the time being by Rias along with the majority of the troops he had led into the city during the actual conflict, Sala had felt that particular point of the Potter Triangle was in as good a position as he could make it. All they needed now out there was more transportation, more time, and more supplies to start spreading beyond the Triangle.

Looking over the notes and the map that Abraxas had been working from, Sala was pleased to note that was pretty much the case across the board. Whereas there were still a few pockets within the Potter Triangle that lacked teleportation tunnels, electricity and supplies, there were only a few dozen personnel issues within the triangle. People in the area which hadn't lost so many people to the Harvest were generally pulling together, working towards a common goal of surviving and recovering from this disaster. Outside, organized hoarding and other issues were still ongoing, but that was to be expected, and it would fade soon, in his opinion, so long as the troops were able to keep finding such and stamping on them hard.

So generally speaking, Sala was in quite a good mood as he leaned back in his chair, sipping a cup of coffee and idly hoping that he could spend a few hours at home before heading back to Damanhur. *The reason why I wanted to take a job in the Northern Military Zone in the first place was so that I could be closer to home, but it feels as if since this crisis hit, I've barely been able to spend an hour with my family. I know they are all doing well, but that is a far cry from being there to give out hugs and kisses or spend the night with my wife.*

Unfortunately for Sala, that was the moment that a Indian kshatriya barged into the command room, the guard from the entrance into the command post trailing after him. "We've got trouble."

"Of course we do," Sala sighed, looking down at his barely sipped at coffee, and shaking his head ruefully. "Whatever deities truly exist do seem to have a sense of timing. What exactly is this problem? And should I be calling to rouse Lady Potter, or getting Tiamat or Yasaka and getting one of them back here?"

"Probably," the Indian man answered grimly. "We're looking at hundreds of Hit Wizards boiling out of Lighthouse Lane. Commander Ramagupta sent me off the moment more than ten of them took to the air, but I doubt they're here to help."

Sala frowned, but nodded over to an orderly to start rousing the rest of the communications people. As it was the dead of night, most were off duty despite the ongoing rebuilding efforts. "What are Hit Wizards, and why don't I think I will like the explanation?"

**OOOOOO**

It had taken nearly a full day before the arguments about the new Chief Mugwump's first action, that being pushing to take over Egypt and restore the Statute by military means, to go through. Several representatives had a lot of problems with it. The Mugwumps from Japan, India, Britain and surprisingly America, tried to argue the Wumpus out of the precipitous action.

Britain was a pro forma denial. As Egypt was a British territory, if they allowed the ICW to step in more than they already had, the loss of face would be considerable. Whereas America had sent a large force of their Aurors into Egypt, thanks to a under the table agreement with Roberto, the previous Chief Mugwump. While they hadn't gotten any reports back bar Hermione's report to Roberto, they were still

there, and apparently working with the locals. While MACUSA had just as much disdain for muggles as most, they also trusted their people, and their ability to control the muggles if need be.

That kind of arrogance faltered easily as the new Chief Mugwump Baur Bowcock forced Roberto to share more of Hermione and Padma's report to him. The sheer scope of the disaster and the number of deaths appalled even the arrogant American Mugwump.

On the other hand, India's Mugwump just knew point blank it was impossible to enforce a military takeover of a country the size of Egypt. Not without taking a lot of losses. That India had already sent a force of their own kshatriyas into help the rebuilding efforts was also a point. The India Mugwump did not come around at all during the debate, but her attempt to filibuster the motion failed.

The Onmyodo government's representative also refused point blank to have anything to do with this action. It too had sent a decent sized group of Shinsengumi into India, and Hermione's report specifically mentioned that most of them were still alive, working with the locals. Even more than that, while he hadn't been informed of everything going on between the Kuoh Clan as they were called in official Onmyodo documents, he had been told that anything Potter and his association did had the backing of his government.

But eventually, the attempts to halt the motion failed, and the push to organize it began. That took a while as well. Hit Wizards were not Aurors, and it took a long while for them to be called up and then brought together. But when they could be, they gave the ICW a very large force. One that Baur felt would be adequate for the task of restoring the Statute in Egypt.

"All right, you all! You've all memorized the pictures of senior Auror Proudfoot, his deputies, and the Orientals and Indians who are supposed to be in command here. We don't have any proof that they are going muggle, but if any of them try to stop us from doing our duty, put them down too. We'll sort out what to do about their dereliction of duty later. If anyone spots Potter, call it in as well."

There were some murmurs from the Hit Wizard company lining the road in front of the speaker at that, and the senior Hit Wizard, Steven Rodovskovo understood that concern. After all, Potter was the man who had defeated the last Dark Lord, and he had worked alongside several of the British Hit Wizards on several occasions during that war.

But, if Potter wasn't willing to help really start to control the situation here in Egypt, then Potter was part of the problem. "Seems strange, but if he and the rest of the magicals here aren't willing to do whatever they can to protect the Statute of Secrecy, then they are part of the problem!" the Ex-Russian national growled, gesturing to a few of the locals who had tried to object. They had been stunned and tied up, and would be someone else's problem after the Hit Wizards were done.

Steven's words stiffened spines across the group as more Hit Wizards came out of the Auror office behind him, followed by still more. More than two hundred Hit Wizards had already come through, with another five hundred on their way.

"You all know we wouldn't have been in if the Pretty Boys could handle this job on their own. Like I said, give the local Aurors a chance to join up, but if they don't fall in line, put them down. Try not to kill any of our own at first, but if the muggles start acting up, put them down hard from the start. The Pretty Boys can work that into the story after."



The nickname for the Aurors that the Hit Wizards all used regardless of what nation they came from brought a chuckle to the crowd. Hit Wizards were not fully trained Aurors. Generally speaking, Hit Wizard really couldn't stand up to a Auror in a standup battle, they didn't have the spell repertoire a Auror had to have to get his or her bade. But they also didn't have the amount of training the Aurors had in law, blending into the non-magical environment, or any training whatsoever in stopping conflict from getting too violent.

Hit Wizards weren't a real military as nonmagicals would understand the term. They were more of a militia, common citizens who volunteered for extra training (or tested out of said training) for whatever reason to add more lethal spells to their regular repertoire, on the agreement that the government could call them up to service.

Of course, Steven knew that historically, the problem was that most Hit Wizards had their own politics, their own beliefs. Most of Germany's Hit Wizards had followed Grindelwald's war of conquest, becoming the core of his army of followers. A goodly portion of the Hit Wizards of the UK at the time had come from Dark families, and rallied to Voldemort's side in both his wars. Most had subsequently died, so there weren't many Hit Wizards among them, and Steven had even heard of a move to no longer train Hit Wizards going through the British Wizengamot. The same had somewhat happened in Greece more recently, with Hit Wizards on both sides of the conflict and the government paralyzed for a time unwilling to call them to service to combat the local dark lord for fear of treachery.

It was also not a quick process to call them up, give them their temporary badges, and swear Hit Wizards in for the duration of the crisis. But now that they were moving, Steven was certain they would be able to fulfill their duty. At the moment, the first echelon, the seven hundred coming through now, were mostly from countries that didn't have issues at home at present, and whose loyalties could be counted on to not waver in the face of possibly putting down Potter and anyone else who might have ideas which did not align with the Statute of Secrecy.

More would be coming in over time, but Steven was certain seven hundred Hit Wizards would be more than enough to subdue Alexandria at least.

With a wave of his hand, Steven sent his people towards the entrance into Lighthouse Lane, with more pouring out of the Auror office behind him. They'd already gathered up a few Aurors patrolling the streets, and though all of the Pretty Boys thus gathered looked annoyed, they fell in readily enough, and Steven nodded. That was a good sign. It meant that at least Proudfoot and his people have their heads on straight. *If we only have to fight the Orientals, Potter, and his weird 'family' then this will be a lot easier than I had feared.*

It wasn't going to be easy by any means, Steven knew. He was an experienced Hit Wizard, and had fought against Grindelwald's troops and actually been at home in Oslo when the dragons came. He knew precisely about this could go, how many damn Muggles there were in comparison to wizards. But they had magic, and surprise. *And we have power to a point. For all we were told, the remnants of the muggle Egypt's military is spread to hell and back, trying to deal with the crisis as they can. The same goes with four Potter and his allies. By the time they know what's happening, this city will be under our control, and maybe if we present Potter with a fate accompli he will fight us when we try to restore order.*

*And if not, well, even some like Potter will fall with enough numbers on our side.*

The group of Hit Wizards disbursed out from Lighthouse Lane, instantly taking to the air, each of them having been supplied with brooms. Instantly, they began to rain down stunning spells at any muggle they saw. Despite it being the middle of the night here in Alexandria, there were still a few dozen people around the immediate area, either working on various construction projects, or simply going about other kinds of business. Many fell before they even knew what was happening.

But there were also many, many kshatriya, something that would later surprise the defenders just as much as it would now the attacker. The groups of Indians instantly began to defend the Muggles. Shields rose, quickly blocking the attacking spells, as one of Ramagupta's folk shouted out, "Stop! This is an unlawful..."

"We are the law!" growled one Hit Wizard, followed by a more serious sort shouting out, "By order of the International Confederacy of Wizardry, we have been empowered to take over the cleanup process here in Egypt! Fall in line, or face charges of collusion with muggles!"

Below, the two Aurors who had tried to talk the Hit Wizards down grimaced as more stunning spells flashed overhead, shaking their heads as one. "They must be up of their rockers!"

"Worse they might freaking well start the war they're so afraid of. Rama was right to station us here" His fellow grumbled, an American who had been roped into providing night watch since he was going to be in the area anyway. Like most of his fellow Americans, he firmly believed in the separation between muggles and magicals, but he also believed just as much in the power of bureaucracy, and this had all the signs of a government panicking, something that he could never see MACUSA doing, if only because of how much paperwork it would create. "I doubt they know everything that's going on here I'd bet. Nothing about a giant dragon that can talking use magic, or a kitsune who can change into a giant fox on a whim."

Nearby, a group of policemen who had also been patrolling this area along with them snickered as they heard that, but it was a grim noise. They knew those spells, and that no deaths had occurred so far, but the shouted orders from the Hit Wizards had also reached them, and filled the Egyptians with fury. Guns came up, and rifles began to track, firing.

Shields quickly sprang into existence, and lethal spells came back their way. "Muggles! Put them down."

The two Auror shared a glance, then ducked back into cover, as their shields failed, returning fire with stunning spells which knocked a few of the Hit Wizards off of their brooms. They were soon caught and revived by their fellows, and at a shouted order, the spells coming towards the two embattled Aurors became lethal. "Back undercover!"

"What the hell is this!? We thought you wizards were mostly on our side." Screamed one of the policeman as they joined the two wizards.

"Don't look at us. Rama would not have posted us here if we thought this was a good thing. This is just a government behaving badly I suppose."

That one a pair of grunts from the other two policemen, who seemed to understand that such things occurred. Then, several of the flying Hit Wizards zipped past their position before looping back. One of the Aurors flung out a hasty Protego, as the other wrenched a nearby ruined car out of its former

position via an Accio, blocking the incoming spells which got through after the shield shattered. But two more were directly above them, and more lethal spells rained down from above, Rifelas striking.

One of the policemen fell headless, while both Aurors took hits to the shoulders and back. The last man had rolled forward, hiding underneath the burnt out car that had been pulled into position to try and defend them.

All around this tiny little battle, the Hit Wizards spread out, ruthlessly lashing out into the city streets below with spells to stun and immobilize the Muggles. As they spread, still more came out from Lighthouse Lane, their job to follow up on the progress made by their fellows, further securing the ever-growing circle of control around Lighthouse Lane.

But as the determined Hit Wizards pushed out further from Lighthouse Lane, they found themselves under furious assault. Protegos flared up from dozens of places, perhaps as many as a hundred scattered through the dozens of streets around Lighthouse Lane as the main force Indian Kshatriya made their presence known. "Defend the civilians! Take them down. Stunning spells to put them on the floor, transfiguration spells to lock them in place for now. But if they all switch to lethal measures we will do the same," Ramagupta shouted from a command post he had set up upon returning to Egypt from his mission as an intermediary. *It would seem as if the warning Lord Shiva gave me was quite accurate. The ICW has overreacted. Now, it falls on us to try and mitigate the damage.*

In an apartment complex near the top of the large apartment building, a Kshatriya waited for a second as several of the Hit Wizards passed the window he was standing beside, not even looking at them. Rather, he was looking at the British Auror with him, cocking an eyebrow. Unlike the majority of his fellow Indians, he and his temporary partner had been up here sleeping, ready to take action when need be. Behind them, several other men were also rousing themselves, grabbing at construction tools as makeshift weapons but looking at the two wizards as well.

The British Auror had been helping them. He hadn't been assigned to the group watching for trouble. But now at the question in his fellow wizard's face he scowled, shrugging his shoulders. "What do you expect me to do? I suppose there comes a time when one has to wonder how lawful an order is, you know?"

"I do know." With that, the Indian man turned back, ignoring the smiles of relief from their companions to lash out with a spell that caught two of the descending Hit Wizards in the back. The Stupefy spell caused them to plummet out of the sky, only to be caught by someone below in an Accio spell. Moments later, they were trussed up and detained as more Hit Wizards began to attack the position from which the initial Stupefy spell came from. A Protego flashed from the British Auror's wand, and then the two of them were pulling away from the window deeper into the building, following after the men they'd been working with.

"By order of the ICW and the Mugwump Council, standdown blast it!" Steven shouted, using a Sonorous spell to be heard over the rising din of the discharge of spells, his lieutenants relaying his words with their own spellwork. "We are not here to fight you! We are here to put the Statue back in place, stand down, damn it!"

He waited a bare few seconds, but when no sign of letup from the defenders could be seen, he growled out an order, still using a Sonorous. "It looks as if the Indians have all gone native. Put them down!"

He canceled the spell, using another spell to direct his words to just his lieutenants. "Try to get them to stand down again every few moments. Let's see if we can force them to realize we've got the whip hand here and get some of them to switch sides like the Aurors did in Lighthouse Lane."

The Hit Wizards had a major advantage in mobility right now, as well as numbers. Very few of the Indian wizards still retained the few broomsticks they brought along. Those had been in short supply from the beginning of the conflict in Egypt and now were almost entirely in the hands of the survey and relief teams operating elsewhere. Here in Alexandria, there were perhaps no more than eight, all in the hands of witches and wizards who specialized in construction, going around helping the non-magical engineers and construction workers out near the outskirts of the city repairing the most damaged areas.

And since the area around Lighthouse Lane had been the source of continual magical efforts to rebuild it, much like the Lane itself, from the moment the war against the monsters ended, they were nowhere to be found. Well, that and the fact it was around three in the morning. But electricity had been mainly restored throughout Alexandria, and with that and the spellights, most people could see easily enough.

This proved deadly for the next few moments. The Hit Wizards flew down and around, zooming through the upper areas of the city, lethal spells now lashing out in every direction whenever they came under attack. Shields failed, and Kshatriyas began to fall here and there, but their initial defense of the territory had succeeded in its first goal. All of the non-magical civilians who had still been up and about had rushed inside the various buildings, taking cover wherever they could.

Even better for later on, those same civilians had seen the wizards and witches who had been helping them all along defend them now against their fellows.

And the first of the Egyptian military forces which were in a position to respond had also seen it. A full company of Egyptian infantry had been temporarily bivouacked nearby. Hearing the sounds of fighting, their officer had roused themselves from where most of them had been sleeping, and the veterans of the Culling raced into battle.

One squad headed upstairs in the building they had been using as their barracks, getting up onto the roof. From there, they began to fire at the Hit Wizards in the air while others pushed forward along the ground, firing at the Hit Wizards who had been knocked off of their broomsticks or taken to the ground for whatever reason.

Fourteen Hit Wizards died before the others in the area could figure out where the fire was coming from. But the militia of the Wizarding World closed ranks quickly, dozens of lethal spells beginning to pepper the area, including the AK and Crucio spells.

Hit Wizards were somewhat notorious for using such spells when they were called up, unfortunately. Not to the prolific use that dark wizards could, less they in turn be labeled such. But there was a certain amount of hate towards non-magicals that was regrettably prevalent in many Hit Wizards from places like Bulgaria, Germany, and particularly among the wizards who had migrated from the former USSR.

The Sergeant of the squad on the roof stared as one of his men slumped, almost like a puppet whose insides had suddenly been turned into Jell-O the instant a green dagger of energy slammed into him. The hit had no force behind it, but the man's eyes were dead and lifeless as they stared at the Sergeant from where he lay. "

Fucking magic!" The man shouted, grabbing his gun and unloading it up into the wizard who had fired. A Protego covered the wizard for a second, but it burst a moment later under the multiple impacts, and two bullets took the man high in the chest, hitting some kind of body armor. A third took him in the face, and he fell out of the sky, his broomstick zipping along in midair for a moment before losing altitude.

Another wizard came from behind, and although being fired and was able to dodge through the fire, lashing out with a spell as he cursed inwardly at how much of a range advantage the non-magicals seem to have with their guns. *Dammit! I knew they were dangerous in the world wars, but even so, the number of bullets these things can put down his insane!"*

This Hit Wizard was a veteran of the war against Grindelwald and had seen action on the Eastern Front against his followers but had rarely seen the amount of bullets he was seeing now from a single squad of the locals. *Have guns come so far in so short a time? Fucking muggles!*

His spell landed on the roof, exploding it in a burst of fire and shrapnel, slaying all of the local infantrymen. As he pulled away, though, an Indian wizard hit him from behind, a Rifela penetrating spell taking him high in his back, bursting through his body and out the other side. "D, damn it..."

Hit Wizards continued to boil out of Lighthouse Lane, but more of the Egyptian military were also arriving, now organized by Sala. The next group to appear on the scene were three helicopters loaded with troops. Two of them sat down quickly near the edge of the expanding conflict, discharging their passengers out into the streets. The infantrymen went to ground, firing up at the Hit Wizards, ducking and moving constantly, keeping the Hit Wizards. One of the helicopters, however, dove through the expanding cloud of Hit Wizards, machine guns on its nose and from its sides blaring, the men manning them furiously firing at every flying wizard they could see.

Several more Hit Wizards fell, unable to evade fire fast enough, but two Bombarda spells slammed into the helicopter. It exploded in midair as its engines blew under the dual impacts.

Still more infantry began showing up in trucks, pushing towards the sound of the battle from all around that area of the city. All of them had been mostly sleeping, few on duty, but there were a lot of them, with more coming in. None of the jets from Northern Military Zone's Air Force had been repaired yet. After all, the priority for the mechanics had been transport planes even after Rias had arrived.

But several anti-air guns, the same KS-19 types which had been used to help take it back Damietta and Damanhur, were quickly repositioned. Their flak fire flew into the combat zone from well, well out of range of any spell that the Hit Wizards had access to.

In response, Steven attempted to push his troops out in that direction. But by this point, Sala had moved enough troops with communication pins and leprechauns (or actual radios) forward and had begun to organize a defensive cordon.

He also made a point to defend the anti-air guns, which Sala hoped would prove as troublesome for the wizards as they had proven for the flying beasts that his people had fought throughout the Culling. So when the group of Hit Wizards pushed outward from their fellows in the direction the anti-air fire was coming from, they ran into further fire from squads of infantry on dozens of rooftops, complete with crew-served weapons this time. Even the strongest Protego that Hit Wizards could throw up couldn't

withstand the number of bullets a SAW could put out, and the survivors of the attempt retreated in disarray.

But even so, more of the Hit Wizards were arriving all the time. And even with long-range anti-air fire, the defenders on the ground within the contested zone were having the worst of it. The Hit Wizards didn't care why the Kshatriyas or other forces who had previously been in Egypt had almost to a man gone over to the other side. They had been given a job. Subdue Egypt to the point where the combined Obliviator teams of the ICW could come in and enforce the Statute of Secrecy. And that was what they were going to do.

And it was here where the real differences between normal Aurors and Hit Wizards became apparent. While the defenders were using lethal spells, they didn't just use them, and the Hit Wizards were willing to not only toss around Avada Kedavra but Crucio and other, even deadlier spells. Spells that created gas, spells that lit stone or concrete on fire, spells that animated the dead or things like the Imperio that gave temporary control of their target. All of these the Hit Wizards used trying to drive the Kshatriya and the muggles back.

Unfortunately for the Hit Wizards, what they had been dealing with up to this point was the local equivalent of the B team. They had yet to meet with any of the serious powers in Egypt. And now, just when the battle on the ground began to shift decidedly in their favor, they did.

Kalawarner had not been asleep like Koneko or Rias. She had instead been praying in one of the local churches. That was something that, even as short as a year ago, would have seemed utterly hilarious to her. The very idea of praying to her Father for any reason would have seemed both pointless and pathetic.

But since meeting Harry, her own personal view of herself had shifted. Since meeting Asia, her thoughts on God had changed. And many a time, Kala had found herself praying along with Asia, not for salvation or for anything really in particular, more simply in thanks for how her life it shifted around. But that night, like all the times previously since the conflict in Egypt had ended, Kala had been praying for Asia to recover.

The adopted Potter was dear to her, a daughter to Kalawarner like Lily was to Rias, and she had become as much of a bedrock in Kala's life as Harry. Knowing that Asia had injured her soul had pushed her soul to the limits so much that the Sacred Gear that was part of her soul had broken, filled Kala with grief and fear.

The sounds of combat began to intrude into her silent solemnity, however, and for a moment, Kala simply stood and stared out into the distance, barely able to see anything through the buildings between her and the conflict. But that was easily solved a second later, and Kala hovered in the air, her wings beating strongly as she stared at what was perhaps the most idiotic example of foolishness she had yet seen from any human. "Are they fucking serious!? Oh, I swear, if this isn't another trick from that Nefertiti woman, heads will roll."

Hats would still roll if that was the case, but at least then Kala would have a specific person to blame for it. From the Sonorous-enhanced shouts that could still be heard occasionally from the Hit Wizards, that didn't seem to be the case. Rather, it appeared to be an example of a government as a unit not understanding reality and sticking its head in the sand. While there wasn't exactly unusual, and Kala had

seen numerous examples of such throughout her time traveling the world, this one was particularly egregious.

But after a second, Kala decided she didn't care who was behind it. These Hit Wizards were attacking their people, their friends, and that was enough for her. *I'm not Asia. I'm not going to turn the other cheek or try to make nice!* She thought as she zoomed up words into the air, putting herself higher than most of the Hit Wizards had gone so far, the range of their spells forcing them to keep low over the skyline of the city or zoom in between buildings. *I'm just going to show these assholes that they are in over their head!*

The thought of Asia did stay in her hand for a brief second, even as she summoned dozens, then hundreds of Light Lances into being all around her. *Dammit, I really am getting soft. Still...* With a mere thought, Kala sent her Light Lances flashing down from above the Hit Wizards.

Only three of them were killed outright, spitted through by her Light Lances hitting their heads or backs. The rest of the Light Lances sliced into their brooms, shearing through and causing the Hit Wizards using them to tumble screaming toward the ground. And not in ones and twos, but dozens.

The Hit Wizard assault on the dug0in locals stopped for a few seconds as most of them twisted around to help their fellows. Still more raced up words towards where the attack it come from, only for many of them to be speared off of their broomsticks with other Light Lances.

Kala easily avoided all the spells coming her way or threw up her own Protego. While she had studied more in the way of runes and smacking than anything else, she had learned a few Protegos from Harry and, like Rias, had been able to forge them into her own. Although in her case, Protegos always looked more as if a Light Lance had been turned into a giant glowing shield.

She zoomed down into the tumult below, lashing out in every direction with Light Lances as she screamed. "Die or surrender! Those are your choices, you assholes!"

Steven cursed worriedly as he tried to gain more altitude away from the mad creature. *What the hell? She must be some kind of oriental half monster. They call them youkai, right? What kind, maybe a crow?* The feathers actually didn't match that idea, being more gray than black, but he didn't care right now about that. He needed to get a handle on the total battle. More Hit Wizards were arriving all the time, but with the Floo Network in the Interdicted zone still down, they could only come through the one officially reopened connection between the ICW tower and Proudfoot's office. *That was a damn mistake. We should have let the locals at least open up more connections in Egypt at least. But fuck, would even that have worked? None of the other small magical communities out in the desert had Floo connections.*

*And where the hell is Proudfoot?! He at least should have been able to see the forest for the trees and get the fucking Tommys on our side at least!* He thought.

Actually, even if Proudfoot had been on sight that night, he probably wouldn't have. Despite his own reservations and, indeed, fear of the Statute being broken, Proudfoot was an Auror's Auror. This kind of heavy-handed nonsense would not work, and he knew it. As it was, though, he was not in Alexandria at all. Instead, he had been called forward to work with Tsubaki to build up a resource depot in Cairo to allow survey and relief teams to push further towards the Indian Ocean along the Nile.

He watched as the crow woman who had suddenly appeared on the scene began to decimate his people, smashing them out of the air with contemptuous ease. She seemed to almost not want to kill them, only aiming to kill when they got too close or when she saw one of the locals go down to a lethal spell. But she was still doing a lot of damage.

And in return, a Bombarda spell hit the woman, sending her tumbling but seeming to do no real damage. Similarly, a stupefy spell washed over her without even ruffling the woman's hair as far as he could tell in the light of the Muggle city and the stroking flashes of spellfire. An AK flashed towards her, only to be met by a Light Lance, the two spells intersecting and exploding in midair.

"Hit Wizards, switch-focus to gas attacks or Crucios when you close with that bitch!" Steven shouted, hoping that this would work on the crow woman. Most of the time, gas-based attacks could bypass magical resistance in creatures like giants or werewolves. And the woman seemed to be leery of the AK, so maybe the Crucio would work, too. *And the Crucio's a lot easier to use.*

A blast of air came from her wings, dissipating the cloud of gas coming her way from one of the Hit Wizards flying up towards her. But a Crucio lashed into her back. And it worked.

"AIEEYEEYEEEE!!!" Kala screamed, her body racked with more pain than she had ever felt. Even Falling hadn't hurt like this. Every nerve ending in her body was sending pain pulses to her brain the equivalent of someone being set on fire.

Losing control of her body, Kala fell like a comet out of the sky slamming into the side of a skyscraper, smashing through the side into an office within. There she lay, twitching in aftershocks as several Hit Wizards flew into the hole.

She was followed down by two hit wizards, who flew in behind her through the hole, then set down, wands already glowing green.

Then, a machine gun opened up by the door as two infantrymen fired at the Hit Wizards. Only one of them was able to throw up a Protego in time. A third man rushed forward, grabbing at the still-shaking Kala and dragging her towards the door. The Hit Wizard lashed out, cutting one man in the doorway.

The man carrying Kala reached the door, tossing her through just before one of his fellows lobbed a grenade at the wizard. It didn't work, but the Hit Wizard huddled behind his Protego, allowing the two surviving infantrymen to carry the still spasming Kala away.

Elsewhere, Irina and Xenovia were also getting involved. The two of them had been up and wandering the city, talking quietly about what had happened when the light of combat had begun to light up the skyline.

Lacking any real long range weapons – although they retained their Excalibur fragments, even Excalibur Mimic could only turn into polearms not bows – they took the fight to the Hit Wizards who had rather foolishly started to try and clear out one of the buildings at the edge of the combat zone when multiple Kshatriya attacked from it. In close quarters, the two exorcists were able to overcome any group of hit wizards they met.

The initial response to their assault into Alexandria had held them up long enough for Sala to get in touch with Rias and the others.



A teleportation circle appeared right outside Lighthouse Lane, and out popped Cu, accompanied by four golems, the only four golems in the city bar the two guarding the orphanage. Cú darted into Lighthouse Lane, his spear up and stabbing into the first Hit Wizard he saw. Bursting through into the Lane over the man's body into several more, his spear thrust and stabbed, a wicked grin on his face as the runes covering his body blazed to light, protecting the demigod from any magic bar the most powerful. "You all picked the wrong damn fight, boys!"

An instant later, an AK flashed past him, and instinct had him rolling forward. The spell flew over his head, hitting a Hit Wizard behind him who fell soulless to the ground. Seeing this out of the corner of his eye, Cú snarled, "Well, at least you're going to give a fight of it."

Two of the golems positioned themselves right there at the entrance to Lighthouse Lane providing cover fire for Cu. Behind them Sona hopped through after the initial attackers. A sphere of water rose all around her, intercepting several spells from the Hit Wizards around them before the other two golems began to open fire on the Hit Wizards who had lost their brooms and fallen back towards Lighthouse Lane. Metal ball bearings shot from their wrist gauntlets, or bolts of Power of Destruction lashing out, ignoring with disdain any Protego on their way before disintegrating the individual they struck.

"Surrender!" Sona bellowed, using the devil equivalent of a sonorous to make herself heard throughout the battle. So loud was her voice that many of the attackers and defenders fell to their knees, clapping hands over their brutally abused ears. "This attack is madness! You are just piling perfidy upon disaster! Surrender, you are outnumbered and thoroughly overpowered!"

Several dozen attacks flashed toward her, impacting the water sphere around her, but Sona simply renewed the water within the sphere with a negligent wave of her hand. The power to control water was what had marked her family out as one of the Pillar Clans among devilkind for generations. And while she was not a powerhouse like her sister, Sona was more than capable of facing off against wizards of this caliber. Even AK spells could be blocked by sufficient amounts of water or a simple levitation spell tossing a solid object in between her and the incoming spell.

High above that portion of the battlefield, Steven cursed. He was close enough to see what had happened and to even make out some details, having retreated towards the entrance to Lighthouse Lane to hopefully find one of the other higher-ranking wizard officers coming through. He was somewhat flummoxed by the sheer amount of fire they were already taking and hoping someone else had some suggestions. Or better, a few dozen portkeys to elsewhere in Egypt so that they could open up another avenue of attack.

How someone with a spear of all things could just ignore most of the magic being flung his way like that man who had just run into Lighthouse Lane had, he didn't know. But as he watched, two wizards tried to get through the entryway into Lighthouse Lane only to be stopped in their tracks by the woman. A cutting spell that looked strangely like water given vicious speed slammed into them, bisecting both wizards in an instant.

One of the other Hit Wizards instantly upped the ante in a way even most Hit Wizards would have balked at. "FIENDFYRE!" he shouted, pointing his spell down at the woman.

Fiendfyre was not just a fire spell, it was a Dark spell, one that created a living flame that wanted to burn anything it could, and had the ability to do so. The fire could only be contained by the will of the caster

crushing the will of the fire, and that was incredibly difficult. The fire wasn't sentient, but it had a lot of hate, power and anger.

Sona flinched slightly at the sight of the Fiendfyre, the images in it resembling tortured souls as it crashed into her water barrier. Her water steamed away in a instant, producing enough heat to cause her pain, but Sona pushed through it. Summoning more water into being, she thrust it forward like a hydra, attacking fire and caster alike. The fire ate into her water continually, but Sona refused to let it get out of hand. With one of the golems guarding her, she turned all her attention on the fire, bringing more and more water into being to try and douse it.

Three witches nearby charged forward toward Sona, lashing out with spells towards one of the golems guarding her. Their spells did little damage to golem, which counter charged quickly. None could switch to the defensive in time, and the creature turned one of them into a paste with a punch, then slammed the other two together with such force their bones shattered even as an AK hit it, only to just blow a portion of its surface off, doing no real damage.

Seeing all this from above, Steven began to feel real panic. Without reinforcements, he knew that what the woman had said was accurate. They were outnumbered and outgunned. Whatever that oriental crow woman was, or even this water-using girl, it was very obvious they were well beyond a normal wizard or witch in terms of power. *I have to do something. I have to organize and retake the entrance to Lighthouse Lane. A full retreat may be...*

That thought, too, had come too late.

From above Steven, another female voice bellowed at the top of her magically enhanced lungs, and he turned to stare upwards at a young redheaded girl with curves enough to cause him and several other men to gape even as the fight raged all around them. "Enough! Enough killing, enough senseless violence! You come into this land, already torn by war, to bring more death and misery?! Enough!"

Dozens, then hundreds of tiny portals opened across the entire battlefield, sharing apertures that appeared around the woman, where someone Steven recognized as Tonks, a British Auror with a penchant for violence and several other witches and wizards stood. All of them shot out a mixture of stupefy and incarcerating spells, and from the tiny portals, those same spells shot out, downing first dozens, then hundreds of the surviving Hit Wizards as the portals shifted target zones. Many of those probably fell to their death, but others were grabbed out of the sky by Accio or Wingardium Leviosa spells.

Steven saw many of his men thus caught were slowly floated down toward the ground, where they were quickly captured. And then another portal opened directly in front of the wildly evading Steven, and he knew no more.

After the last of the Hit Wizards fell out of the sky, the sound of bullets continued for a few seconds, forcing Rias to realize that the locals were in no mental position to care about taking prisoners or future problems. *Dammit! But I can't let them simply massacre the Hit Wizards. That would just cause more trouble down the line. We're already going to face a lot of issues with what's happened here as it is.*

With that, Rias did something that she had only done twice before, with the first time aided with the connection between herself and her peerage members. She flared her aura out from her body as she

had done when Cú challenged her and when the oath-based curse placed on Kuroka threatened to overawe her will.

And this time, Rias didn't try to control it. Rather, she pushed it out as hard as possible. A feeling of awe and not a little bit of fear flared out from Rias as it had from the enchantment on Kuroka. But instead of driving people to their knees, it simply caused them to twitch, stop, and slowly lose the battle lust that had infected far too many of the minds around Rias, both magical and not.

"Enough!" Rias shouted for a third time, gesturing to Tonks, the Shinsengumi and the Aurors with her to head back down toward the ground. "This is a tragedy, the reasons for which we will discover in time. But do not make it any worse on our side than it must already be. Company commanders, please make yourselves known and tally up your wounded. Rama and any other surviving officers among our magical defenders, please do the same while also incarcerating every unknown magical you see. Egyptian soldiers, please leave that to your allies. And remember, this government does not speak for all of its people. Look around you. See how many of the Aurors who fought with you, have been helping you rebuild, fell in your defense."

Rias waited for a heartbeat to let that sink in, thanking her family once more for the lessons in public speaking before going on. "We will get to the bottom of why this attack was launched and what they were possibly thinking. And there **will** be repercussions. But please, please, show restraint here. The last thing any of us want is more bloodshed."

*And for that violence to spawn blood feuds between nonmagicals and wizards. I won't let that happen. I wanted to slowly introduce the idea of the Kuoh Group and the Three Factions and so forth to the wizards. But this action means it's time for some hard truths and harder lessons.*

Accompanied by her aura and still more magical aid arriving in the form of seven Shinsengumi carpets and Sona's two knights, this seems to work, much to the chagrin of Mittelt, who also arrived on the scene at that point. She flew up towards Rias, a pout on her face. "Seriously!?! I missed all the fun!"

Scowling, Rias bopped her second Bishop over the head, shaking her own. "Not the time, Mittelt. With me, we need to finish this quickly. Suzaku, please join us. The rest of you move around and help the wounded as best you can."

Behind Rias, the elder Himejima nodded grimly while all around them, more Shinsengumi arrived from elsewhere in the city. "What are we going to do?"

"Since the ICW's headquarters is technically unplottable, we need to take control of the Floo Network. I might need your expertise with talismans."

Hermione and Padma met them as they entered Lighthouse Lane, with a furious Bill behind them. "We were all asleep when the Hit Wizards came through," Hermione explained. "They stunned Bill when he tried to object and put cuffs on both of us." The brunette sniffed. "Luckily, I can do some wandless magic, and was able to release Padma if not myself eventually. How--"

"Later," Rias cut her off, gesturing towards the Auror office building. "Am I right that the Floo connection in Proudfoot's office is still the only one working?"

Hermione nodded in reply, while Bill added, "There aren't all that many Floo connections in Egypt at all, and to open up the few others, the Interdict would need to come down. The only one that can be officially activated during the Interdict is the Auror office's."

"Good. Now come on. I want to keep that connection open, but with us in command of it." Rias led the way forward, unsurprised to find Cú had already sliced his way into the building and to Proudfoot's office. All the wode tattoos across his body were gleaming bright blue, and he looked somewhat battered, but as they watched, the demigod took a Bombarda straight to the waist and didn't seem to feel it.

But Rias didn't care to wait, and a shout of, "Down Cu!" left her lips a split second before a high power Stupefy left her hand. Like the others she had learned several wizard type spells from Harry. But this one was so overpowered even Cu, with all his defensive runes and magical resistance, felt it and slumped. The People past him were flung into one another, the doorway and the walls of the hall and Proudfoot's office like billiard balls.

When the spell ended, Cú pushed off his knee, grumbling. "Damn cailin (girl), you don't play around, do ya?"

Even with that the Shining Sun of Ireland was the first one into Proudfoot's office. He stood there, staring at the green fire in the fireplace before shaking his head. "Blast, and here I thought there'd be more fighting." With that, he promptly began lounging against the outer wall, winking at Akeno's aunt. "Well, I suppose I can just stay and watch you lovely ladies at work, yeah? What's your name, pretty one?"

"Fufufufu, my name is Suzaku Himejima, and I am afraid you are barking up the wrong tree, Hound. While I am not married like Rias-chan or my darling niece in all but name, I am in a relationship with a werewolf already. Even upgrading to a demigod doesn't interest me enough to turn me aside from that," Suzaku chortled, making a point to shake her prodigious chest as she did just to tease the Irishman further.

"Ugh. Seriously? Ah, well, I'll just have to do with the locals still," Cú smiled easily, having met and engaged in some heavy necking earlier that night when he returned from the hunt Rias and Abraxas set him on.

Rias ignored the pair, frowning as she examined the green fire then the fireplace, with Hermione and Padma explaining all they knew about the Floo Network. The Floo Powder's creation was proprietary, but the building and enchantments needed to built the fireplace and connect it to the network was something else. Rias took it in, and touching the inside of the fireplace, was surprised to almost... feel the magic within, not just the power there, but the shape of the enchantment. *Its like seeing a teleportation circle made by one of my family members, almost. Not as clearly,* for certain, but it is there. I wonder...

With Hermione's help she found the few visible runes that needed direct contact with fire or Floo Powder, amused to note that it was indeed a double system. The nature of the fire had to chancvce when in contact with the rune thanks to the Floo Powder, and to either side, a rune needed to be touched directly with the Floo in order to activate the magical transportation.

Touching those runes herself, Rias experimentally allowed some of her magic out, only to scowl a bit. She was able to follow the magical energy within, but sensed that she could not shut them down from here. *I would have to go through and find the central command node of the network to close it from that end. Drat. Still, it's impressive the wizards even thought about security against something like this.* "But I can keep it open," Rias mused aloud, then looked over at Suzaku and the others. Explaining what she was feeling she said, "I'll be able to take it over and stop them from closing it down from their end, but if you all could come up with something to keep them from just using it regardless, I would appreciate it. Nothing lethal or even damaging, but humiliating would suit."

Hermione smirked. "I might not be a Weasley twin, but I think I can come up with something."

"Ooh, let me join," Cú snickered, joining the others as they began to look over the Floo's fireplace.

Nodding at that, Rias turned back to her own work, concentrating as she began to pulse her magic into the enchantment within the Floo Network, smiling faintly. *I could never have done this before without training to control my inner magic or getting a boost as I did by Aine Fand. Heck, I didn't think I would be able to do it now. But it is certainly fascinating to realize how far I've come since Harry came into my life. Get well better soon, my love. Or I just might conquer fellow wizards while you're taking a nap.*

OOOOOOO

Outside Lighthouse Lane, dawn finally broke in the east while the losses for this short but extremely sharp battle with the Hit Wizards were tallied up. Nearly eight hundred Hit Wizards had come through before Cú and the others arrived, and they had been able to push out to cover nearly a third of the city. They had lost nearly half that dead or wounded, while the rest had been captured. Not a one of them had escaped beyond simply fleeing Cú back into the Floo.

Luckily, due to the time of the attack and how many Kshatriyas had been in the area, there weren't many deaths among the civilians. Despite how much of the city had once more become a battlefield. The military, however, had taken a pounding, particularly the first two companies on the scene. Both of them had been nearly wiped out to a man. The Kshatriyas had also lost several dozen of their people thanks to being the first on the scene, and the other Auror forces had lost a handful in total.

But all of them were fine with that, as they had succeeded in keeping the deaths among the civilians to a low. Only fourteen civilians, had actually been slain, and none of them children. The damage to the territory around Lighthouse Lane was somewhat severe thanks to how many Bombarda spells had been tossed around by the Hit Wizards.

This sacrifice was not lost on the people of Alexandria, and a lot of the local anger against magic in general had faded. That didn't mean the civilians and military personnel were not utterly furious about this attack. They were. This was clearly on show when the mayor and a now-awake Abraxas called for an emergency meeting of the so-called high command.

"How was this allowed to happen!?" The mayor of Alexandria shouted, slamming one fist down on the table in the meeting room being used for this meeting. The man would have preferred to have the meeting in his office, which he had reclaimed over the past few days, but there were too many people in the meeting for that.

Next to him, Abraxas and Sala sat on either side of the native side of the table, also looking thunderous. Proudfoot, Rama, Sona, Husukai and a transformed Tiamat sat on the other three sides of the table. The dragon queen had been called back just in case the wizards somehow had another means to get to Egypt beyond the Floo Network. All of the Wizarding World individuals looked particularly dyspeptic, especially Proudfoot, who was visibly sweating under everyone's gazes.

But he did not look away from the looks he was getting and when he spoke, the British man's tone was firm. "I have only been able to question a few of the prisoners, but that was enough to give me the most pertinent information, why this attack was launched. Hermione, Padma, and Kala gave a report to the ICW about what was going on there. The ICW replied at first by simply sending us supplies. However, the reactionaries, call them the old guard, among the Mugwumps took confidence in their fears. Apparently, they pushed for a vote of no-confidence in the former Chief Mugwump, forcing him out of office."

At that, the mayor's eyes widened, and much of his initial fury began to subside as he thought about the implications of that. Egypt had several... tumultuous exchanges of power over the decades, even in modern times. They were well aware of how policies could change when one party replaced another in such an abrupt manner.

But his anger was quickly replaced by fear. "So, was this a quick reaction on their part or a planned response? And now that they know they can get through that Floo network, what will they do?"

"They will do nothing," Tiamat growled, shaking her head. She was quietly furious that she had been away again when something happened in Alexandria, and was almost hoping that the Wizarding World would try something else while she was here. "Not only has Rias, Cú and Suzaku taken over the Floo connecting, this 'attempt to restore order' was a disaster of the first order for them. Something Rias will be explaining to them in person soon along with her little delegation."

Sala and Abraxas exchanged a glance, and their own cold fury subsided a bit more at that. Like her husband, Rias had garnered a tremendous amount of respect for her work since she had arrived. Her teleportation tunnels had meant the difference between life and death for thousands of babies and toddlers, let alone how much help to every other aspect of the ongoing relief efforts they were. And last night, she had shown point-blank that she wasn't just a transportation specialist. Even with Sona and Kala both on the scene, subduing the remaining Hit Wizards would have taken far more time and lives without Rias.

"As it is, they have negatively colored both how the Indian and Onmyodo forces here in Egypt view them. And both India and the Onmyodo are not subject to the interdict. They might not be able to send forces because the Floo network is closed, but we have already begun to send fairies overland to carry the message to her superiors. We both have representatives on the Council, although we aren't seen as powerful players there. But this is going to cause a rift within the Wizarding World, not just between our nations but possibly between muggle-born and wizards born into the magical world. The old fogies truly did not think this through," Rama interjected before smiling politely over at Husukai. "No offense to your advanced years, man."

"None taken. I tend to think of it as a meeting between two negatives which multiply one another. The first being old age and the second the political mind. Politicians of all sorts seem to have trouble grasping reality occasionally," Husukai answered dryly. "The histories are full of them, to say nothing of fictional

books I so enjoy reading in my shop as well." *I would dearly like to get back to my shop at some point this year...*

"It back on task, please," Tiamat growled once more, and all of the men in the room stiffened.

"Regardless, this will undoubtedly have caused even further tension between the magical and non-magicals. It will be your job, all of you, to make sure that nothing happens there. We haven't had any true flareups for a while except between religious zealots and the people who believe Asia is a saint. I know we can't stop those occurring occasionally, but we can't allow the anger against this stupidity to default into a general hatred of magic or those who know it. Or else, no one will be able to predict where this conflict will take us."

"I know Rias well enough to us believe she had some kind of plan going forward, but whether or not this incident might have derailed them, I can't say," Sona said. Although new on the scene, with both peerages backing her along with the Shinsengumi, no one had argued that she could stand in for Rias as the organizational leader of the magical side of the relief efforts. "For now, I think we can trust her and the others to get our point across to the ICW in as forceful a manner as possible. We should instead work to offset Rias no longer being here. The impact that will have on our relief efforts is going to be large"

"Agreed on both counts. They are little men with little minds but a lot of power. But even such as they can be forced to admit their faults with a big enough stick," Tiamat drawled, causing a bit of tension relieving laughter. "And we need to get back to more important matters."

"Before that, there is one thing that I don't understand, Rama," Sala spoke up, drawing eyes to him for a moment. "Why did you have so many of your men stationed near Lighthouse Lane. If you hadn't done that, who knows how much damage those Hit Wizards could have done before they were stopped."

Rama chuckled a bit. "Ah, well, that is going into an area I'm not sure any of you bar Tiamat are... philosophically up to contemplating."

The Egyptians all laughed, and Abraxas answered for them. "Well, we've learned magic is real, two different societies exist living right among our own, ancient gods existed, and that there are even demigods and devils in the world. What could be more shocking than that?"

Rama smiled thinly. "That many of the gods of my Hindu faith are still alive."

While the others were stunned by that, Tiamat leaned over the corner of the table separating her from Ramagupta, smiling thinly. "Talk, Hindu."

"Ah, well, it is something of a tale. One that I feel blessed to have experienced, both the good and the bad..." Rama began, thinking about how to explain the religious experience he had suddenly found himself on.

### **Flashback:**

Coming out of the Floo Network into the ICW building, Rama was quickly waved through the ongoing security measures within the tower. He had after all left barely a few days ago at the head of the Indian reinforcements for Egypt. One of the Aurors there, one Rama had worked with in the past, asked, "Back again Rama? Don't suppose you're heading home to India to convince them to send out more reinforcements?"

While Egypt was still under Interdict, it wasn't the only place. Even if you set aside Greece and the cities attacked by dragons, there were the natural disasters which were currently racking the world to think about. Several magical communities were facing problems thanks to them, and a few had even been wiped out. Even though the Aurors knew the various governments were calling up their Hit Wizards for that very reason, more help would have been very nice. Especially fully trained help rather than wand-happy assholes. Unfortunately, while the Onmyodo government was proving very helpful in the oriental sphere, India wasn't giving very much help outside the large force sent into Egypt, which was annoying a lot of people.

Rama bowed theatrically. "I am deeply flattered you think I have that kind of pull, I am a mere kshatriya, not a politician. Although I am heading home, I needed a break, and I felt that going home for a moment to get some stomach medicine might do me some good. I know you European folk tend to look askance at some of the meals we Indians eat, but what Egyptian muggles eat doesn't bear thinking about," he replied glibly shaking his head. "And there was no way I was going to take up a healer's time to look at my upset stomach."

The Aurors on duty all snorted at that, shaking their heads and making jokes about how they didn't know queasiness could even occur to a Indian wizard, with all the spices they used in their food. Rama took it good naturedly, having dealt with such before in other operations where he worked with other magical communities. He was quickly turned directly around, reentering the Floo and appearing elsewhere, this time in India.

India only had two town-sized magical communities, both of which had their own local Floo Network, and were connected together by the international one. So he appeared at one of the international stops, but instead of heading home as he said he would (although the temptation was great, Lavender was there) instead, Rama stepped outside, and then outside still further, heading down the Holy River Ganges for a time, breathing in deeply. The arid, desert dry nature of the air in Egypt was a sharp contrast to what he was used to here in the land of many rivers.

When he was well away from the town, Rama took a moment to orient himself to the Holy Ganges, and then, as he had been instructed to, pulled a small knickknack from his pocket, holding it up so it caught the sun.

It was frankly not much to look at. Indeed, the gewgaw in Rama's hand looked like the kind of overly glittering charm designed to look like Ganesha that you could find in any taxi owned by a Indian the world over. Except this one had a real ruby set into one of its eyes. And it was that Ruby he touched with a finger as he prayed, bowing his head over the device as he sent his prayer to his God. Instantly he felt the Ruby underneath his thumb warm, and, although he somehow knew his body remained where it had been, when Rama looked up, he found himself elsewhere.

Rama's spirit found itself standing in a garden, one of astonishing beauty. To one side of where Rama now stood was a small river, three feet across or so, its sides carefully cut to allow access to the river, although a white and gold painted bridge was also built across it. The bridge had rails, each of which was carved into a different animal native to India, ranging from a mongoose to a king cobra, their fangs and claws done out in gold, their eyes topazes.



On the wind was the smell of lotus, hibiscus, and jasmine, the flower bushes visible, making long sinuous paths through the garden, up and down tiny hills, more mounds really. On some of these mounds grew different types of trees, each of them set apart on their own mound. Songbirds could be seen flying around, and Rama spotted a few vines growing here and there. Other small animals also meandered around the area, while a giant tiger, easily the largest such beast Rama had ever seen, lounged. At first, Rama thought the tiger was staring at him, but instead, the beast was looking over his shoulder to where the music of a flute could be heard.

And then there was music, and he turned, seeing a multiarmed man standing and swaying this way and that as he played the flute in front of a woman sitting on the grass in front of him. And it was then, staring at them, and the elephant headed man standing nearby, that Rama knew instantly he was among gods.

Ganesha was the most inhuman of the three, thanks to the elephant head, as depicted in every painting, sculpture or gewgaw. His skin was a light pink mixed with elephantine gray, one tusk was long and spiked, the other broken off halfway down its length. His ears were smaller than a normal elephant's but still wide, flapping in an unseen breeze. In the center of his forehead, there was a figure like a trident marked with a build up dot in the middle. Along his snout another series of Sanskrit travelled down from the beginning of the snout to the end. Ganesha's eyes were dark and piercing as they stared at Rama, and on his palm was the Sanskrit for the word 'beginnings'.

Four arms rose from his body, which was somewhat overweight looking in the stomach area, but his arms and chest were powerfully corded with muscles. His feet were bare, as were the feet of the other gods, although Rama could not tell much more of the goddess's body thanks to distance, which seemed... strange here. As if the garden was so large it encompassed the world, or was just large enough for the gods in some strange way Rama's mortal mind could not understand. Ganesha wore a crown on his head and jewelry made of gold and emeralds, which included a belt and bracelets that jangled lightly as he moved, the sound released somehow like a dozen church bells and the trumpets of elephants at the same time. From Ganesha radiated a feeling of good cheer, determination and power.

That last could also be said of the other two gods in front of him, though thankfully, Rama could not make out any real details of the auras Shiva and Parvati were giving off, his limited senses in that area flooded out by the much closer Ganesha. But that did not stop him from making out some detail of Shiva at least.

Unlike his son, Shiva had a full head of hair on the top of his head, although it did not drop to his shoulders as it did in many of his depictions. Instead, from where he stood Rama could see the sides of two faces beginning on either side of the face looking towards Rama. Two deep-set black eyes and a aquiline nose dominated that face, although a closed third eye above the bindi could be seen in the center of his forehead. Presently he wore no crown, a small flower instead hidden in his hair. Instead he had long circular earrings, and a few loose bangles on his arms made of small ball of various metals, both precious and not. Like his son, he had four arms. Shiva's skin was blue though, a sharp contrast to his red lips. His clothing was a simple tiger's coat, hanging from one shoulder and wound around itself at his waist.

And when those eyes landed on Rama, distance did not matter. He instantly became aware that the owner of those eyes was not human in any way, that he was beyond mortality, so far beyond Rama's

simple understanding. While Ganesha gave off a feeling of comradeship, Shiva gave the impression of both otherness and wildness in one.

Rama could not help it. Before he could even think of it, his spirit knelt, both knees hitting the ground, his arms crossed in front of him as he bowed. "Lord Shiva, Lord Ganesha. Lady Parvati. I am humbled..."

"You are my follower!" Ganesha rumbled, moving towards him, and reaching down with his massive hands to draw Rama up, setting him back on his feet, his jewelry jangling with his words rather than movement. "And we gave you a task. Do not bow, we do not need such obeisance. Not from one whose fidelity we already trust so."

"I thank you, My Lord. But you might not think so in a moment. For I do not believe that I will be able to tell you all that you need to know to understand what caused the great upheaval you spoke to me about on Earth. I know of it now, but I am under an enchantment which might stop my tongue from speaking the truth."

Rama tried to look down at his own mouth. That had been quite verbose and far more poetic than he preferred to be. Such flowery terms were best used to good effect with his wife, not when serious conversations like this needed to happen.

But if he noticed anything amiss about how Rama was speaking, Ganesha did not comment on it. Instead he simply looked at the man, a guffaw coming from below his long elephantine snout. "I am the God of the breaking of barriers! Do you think that such would be able to stop you from speaking the truth to me?"

"It has held up in the past to those of Divine and Devil power my Lord. Whether or not your own abilities might be able to alleviate that I know not."

"Speak then, and we will see."

Unfortunately, the moment that Rama began to use the word Egypt, he could see that Ganesha's attention on him faded, and the God patted his hand. "As if anything of importance could happen there! Now, let us be going on other matters I..." The elephant God's eyes widened, and for the first time, the music in the background paused too, as Shiva turned his attention away from his wife with manifest reluctance. Pulling his flute away from his mouth, he tucked it into his belt, and stormed over to stand beside his son, clapping one of his many hands on the other God's shoulder as he looked down at Rama.

"I believe that Ramagupta speaks the truth. Do not question him further verbally." Shiva looked closely at the human, then asked intensely, "Can you think of what you are wanting to tell us?"

"I can my Lord Shiva. I am simply that you will not be willing to listen, or would otherwise ignore it. The information would not stay in your mind, would instead be ignored as if it did not exist. That is the nature of the Interdict. It is a Notice Me Not spell on a massive scale."

"So the humans have spells that can affect even gods. Something which we have long known considering how many of your magical communities are hidden from us, but it is interesting to see one in action like this from so close," Shiva said, clearly in his more erudite mindset at the moment. So, you cannot communicate the information to us, because that spell affects how we input that information. But like all

magic, there might be a loophole. I wonder, did the creators of the interdict make room for direct mind to mind transfer?"

"As the Interdict is made to work on non-wizards, and that kind of thing is a known wizard-type spell, I believe it might work..." Rama began hesitantly.

"Father, Rama is currently our only go-between of the group of humans and Denny gods that you are wishful for us to make an alliance with. I would rather not leave him a vegetable," Ganesha warned.

Shiva waived several hands airily, an altogether frightening sight given who he was, and the power he wielded. "I will be careful, and only removed the portions of his mind I'm most interested in. I Don't worry, the operation only has a ten percent chance of turning his brain into mush."

Rama barely had a moment for his eyes to widen at that, before one of Shiva's other heads gently poked him in the forehead. "Now, think of what you wanted to tell us, work through the events that caused that massive magical jolt we all felt from beginning to end as you know it. Hold that sequence of events in your mind, press it outward."

The young kshatriya could not have disobeyed that voice even if he had wanted to. Shiva spoke with all the authority of a God, and no mortal could disobey when a God spoke like that. Especially not one of his own personal gods like in this case. And so Rama did so, thinking through what he had been told about events in Egypt from start to finish.

And then there was pain. For all the fact that he knew that his spirit was no longer quite connected to his body, his pain glands certainly seemed to be working overtime for a few moments and Rama felt his body spasm. At the same time that his body began to shake and quiver, and his eyes began to close though, Rama saw a sliver of silvery substance move from his forehead into Shiva's finger.

The pain swiftly ended as Shiva pulled his finger away along with the silvery substance, which quickly disappeared into his finger as if it was a snake going into a hole. For a second Shiva stood there, his eyes crossing for a few moments, followed by his arms, while Rama sagged, and might have fallen if not for the hearty hand of Ganesha grabbing him by the shoulder. "Mother dear, I believe one of your fruits as needed."

Through his pain filled haze, Rama could see only one thing then. The image of Parvati, goddess of beauty as she moved towards him.

Vibrant was Parvati, a warm smile on her face, part motherly part energetic youth, all warmth, all beauty. Her hair, black as night, fell down from her head in waves, matching her eyes. Her skin was a vibrant tan, her face shaped like a heart, with a small chin, full lips, and cheekbones which showed dimples of all things. A red dhoti flowed around her, hugging her stomach and chest, showing off yet hiding her curves entirely. She moved with as much grace as a swan seemed to glide on a pond, and from her a visible halo shown as she moved closer to Rama, it's colors pink and light yellow around her shoulders and head.

What fruit it was she pressed into his hand, Rama could not say later. Yet Rama had to have eaten, had to have lifted the fruit from his hand to his mouth. There was something in his mouth, and he was chewing. And slowly, the pain went away. But he could not recall even the conscious choice to chew whatever it

was, or indeed anything else about it. All that dominated Rama for those few moments before the goddess moved away from him was how beautiful she was.

And then, Ganesha was shaking him, laughing lightly, and Shiva was nodding, humming thoughtfully as he began to dance in place.

That sight, the many arms flicking around, the dance that the God of destruction was doing, roused Rama from whatever stupor the aura of the goddess had created in him. "Fascinating, amazing. Humans, what will they think of next. And they call me the destroyer. And they called me the God of Destruction. To use magic so, to enslave gods, to become a God through sacrifice, unwitting sacrifice at that! Diabolical, clever, deceitful!"

Gone was the meditative, thoughtful aspect of Shiva, in its place was the God of war, of destruction and time. In every hand, Shiva was suddenly holding a weapon, each of which equal to that of a Sacred Gear, the combination so powerful as to become a match for any of the thirteen Longinus level Sacred Gears like the boosted gear or defined fighting, or the True Longinus. And Rama was almost pleased to note that even Ganesha looked a little startled at how furious his father certainly was. "I wonder how well these fools can hide? It has been ages since I last hunted such fine prey."

But Rama was even more pleased when a single word from his wife caused all of Shiva's anger to dissipate. "This is my garden, husband. Not your war room. A certain amount of decorum is necessary here."

Shiva turned away from Rama, bowing deeply his weapons disappearing again to wherever they had come from. "Forgive me, wife. It is just that at times the depths to which human souls can steep is appalling. Truly it would take hundreds of lifetimes spent as a worm or other creature to expunge their souls of such filth! And the damage they have done to Pṛthvī Mātā (Gaia). I do not know if it can be repaired. If it can be made right."

"An overfull garden is not made right husband, it is pruned back, the foliage within moved elsewhere." Parvati said firmly. "Do not look at Pṛthvī Mātā as if it is a problem that must be solved, or a construct that can be repaired. It is a garden, view it as such."

While somewhat thrown off still by the goddess's power through her voice, and the stilted manner in which she was speaking, Rama was thankfully able to gather his scattered wits enough to understand the analogies they were all throwing around. Yet though the analogies were simple, he understood that the gods in front of him fully understood how both what was going on in Egypt, and the danger to the earth as a whole. "My Lords, what would you have me do?"

Shiva's good humor abruptly returned, and he clapped Rama on the back with several of his hands, sending the Rama's spirit to his knees. "Well, for one thing, if you don't want kids, I would suggest abstaining from sex for the next two months. No magical contraceptives or non-magical contraceptives will douse your virility for that amount of time now that you have eaten a grape from the garden of my lady. Although of course, that does leave a lot of other things you can try!"

The sight of the goddess of love hiding her mouth with the sleeve of one hand and the slight movement of her cheeks caused Rama to blush, understanding the other aspect of Parvati then: goddess of fertility.

*Thankfully, I know that Lavender is hopeful for children, although perhaps the speed with which that will occur might surprise her.*

But what Shiva said next wasn't nearly as humorous. "And as for this Rias woman's concerns, a full demigod us, fascinating, she is quite correct. We could not appear directly on earth at this point. There's a reason why the entire pantheon retreated to our pocket dimension long ago, a reason that Ophis is upset with her very presence. Further I sense..." Shiva frowned looking as if he was going to break off and thought for a second before shaking his head, and concentrating once more on Rama. "Even setting aside the idea that Ophis might move against us if she sensed our presence on earth, Rias is correct. Unfortunately, it looks as if we will have to set back our meeting with Harry Potter even further. Unless..." Shiva suddenly grinned, holding up a finger, "he initiates that invitation from somewhere else. A place where he is the sole door warden, so to speak."

And then, Shiva was suddenly serious once more, crossing his arms, and when he spoke it was in the voice he accused earlier before Parvati had cut through his anger. "Pass that on, and I believe we can accept that Harry will contact us as soon as he is able. And as for yourself Rama, you have done my family and us all a great service by acting as our go-betweens here. Continue to do so, and your family will continue to benefit from our patronage, I swear it.

Shiva then leaned close, and whispered, "And, for now, I think it best that you remember that while the gair jaadoo (nonmagical) might not be able to understand or know what is going on in Egypt, your fellow magicals do know about it. And they are just as he and prone to mistakes as any."

### **End flashback**

"And thus, I decided to keep a strong force of money fellow Indians around Lighthouse Lane. Inside it, our presence there would've been noticed, given the numbers I had deployed. But, I knew I had to be ready for some measure of stupidity coming from the Wizarding World. I simply did not anticipate the sheer amount of fecund matter that was about to land on her heads," Rama finished, after giving a much abridged version of his vision to the others there. No need to speak about the garden or how Padma's presence affected him, after all.

There was quite a bit to unpack there, and looking around the table, Sona noted she wasn't the only one somewhat stunned by the revelations within. but for now simply nodded her head, smiling at the man. "I think there are a lot of people across not only Alexandria, but the rest of Egypt that owe you a great debt for that Rama. Let me be the first to officially thank you for it regardless."

She then shook herself, and with a flare of magic from her hand, pulled out a map of Alexandria, laying it out on the table. "But now, as I said, we need to get back to real work. Let Rias and the others with her handle the Wumpus..."

### **End Chapter**

This was not entirely the chapter I had wanted to show. I was hoping to have the first scene with Harry returning, but his discussion with Asia was flat out bad. I also was worried about the immediate reaction of a another near-god (not quite there yet in terms of power, but he's now VERY close) returning to Earth. So I need to work on that scene. To say nothing of the meeting with the Wizard's Wumpus. My

first draft of it was horrible. Too much exposition, far too much explanation. So I need to work on that too.

The next chapter will show the end of the Egypt arc, the meeting in Kuoh – which has now been moved up immensely – some romance, some personal growth, and a lot of tracking and planning. From then on we will be moving into the final arc of this story folks.