

Ain't British, can't draw.

FINALLY. Here it is, the next FILFy chapter. I've been intending to get this out for months, but I kept on rethinking scenes, getting Real-lived up the ass and GRAHH...

Anyway, here it is. Happy Super Bowl to my fellow Americans. It's been edited by Grammarly and by Nad Destroyer my brother in ADHD. I don't doubt though there are still small mistakes inside, but hopefully not enough to bother you. I'm posting this here now, and will post it over on fanfic during the Super Bowl. If you spot any small mistakes, tell me, and I will correct them right away.

Chapter 34: A Trap Opens...

With all the work piling on him lately, and through him Grayfia, of course, it was late at night by the time Sirzechs could finally take some time for himself. He spent it by walking through the gardens of the Gremory mansion with two of his friends.

It was not the night directly after, but two days after returning to the Underworld from the amazing presentation that Harry's research team had put on for everyone involved. Two days of hurried diplomacy, hard work, and a good deal of scheming in order to not only set up the logistics for the upcoming mass enchantment but also to set up what needed to happen before that: to whit, the trap within Cocytus through which he, Harry and their forces helped to cut down on the number of enemies that could interfere with the world-spanning ritual that Harry's think tank had created which could save Earth from death by magical overflow. Luckily, they already had an idea of what Cao-Cao of the Khaos Brigade and the two shapeshifting humans were after, and it lay in one of the most defensible areas in all of history.

All of that had taken a lot of work, and so Sirzechs was pleased to be able to take in a night's walk through his family's gardens. Of course, it was a working walk for a given definition of working as his two friends, in this case, were two of his fellow Maou.

"... so I feel like those runic arrays are going to be just nasty. The two of them really put in a lot of effort in a very short timeframe. I'm quite impressed by them, as well as those golems. Those golems have massive military implications," Falbium Asmodeus said from beside Sirzechs, staring ahead of them.

Falbium was a tall but somewhat thin man when he wasn't wearing his formal robes with a completely bald head. This wasn't an affectation. Falbium had simply gone bald at a very young age, something that Sirzechs and Ajuka had teased him about hundreds of times over the years. It was astonishing to both men that someone as lazy and disinterested in most things as Falbium had seemingly lost his hair through worry once given the position of Maou. To which

Falbium always replied, "It isn't the position which made me lose my hair, you bastards. It was trying to keep up with the two of you during the civil war!"

Falbium was the Maou who led the Bureau of Military Affairs, which was a kind of catchall phrase for anything that dealt with specific movements against either of the other two Factions or large-scale movements on Earth that didn't necessarily involve violence but could. If a devil clan wanted to take over another devil clan's territory, Falbium would be the one to assign an overseer to the Rating Game involved. If a devil clan decided to simply move from one territory to another for some reason, they would also then have to tell Falbium's Bureau.

And it was the bureau itself, the bureaucracy rather than the Maou in charge such devil clans would contact. Unlike Ajuka, who was walking on Sirzech's other side and was incredibly hands-on with his own technology department, Falbium was quite hands-off and monumentally lazy. There was nothing he liked more than simply sleeping the day away. But he was incredibly sharp and showed it now.

"In a war between us and Wizarding kind, wizards would only have those three blasted soul-targeting spells of theirs, and thanks for keeping their existence a secret for so long, Sirzechs. It's not like I had a heart attack or anything when I found out about those spells. And yes, looking into them more, I know they've got other spells that can target the soul as well, but those would be the main three," Falbium glared at the redhead, then subsided back into his normal blasé appearance as he continued, although his words were still sharp and intrigued. "Golems, on the other hand, from what I've been able to deduce from what you've told me about them, they could fight mid-powered devils."

"Then it's a good thing Harry, Rias-tan and their group are the only ones making them," Sirzechs said, shutting down that line of discussion for the moment.

"Yes, the golems are interesting, and I know why, given our plans going forward, you're bringing them up. Yet Rias-tan is my dearest little sister and is obviously on our side, Falbium. With Rias-tan and Harry in a relationship, he'll always be on our side too..."

At that point, a cloud seemed to appear over Sirzechs' face, and he slumped gloomily, his voice shifting to a cross between angry and depressed. "That rat fink bastard! Honestly, an older man like him, the teacher, swooping in and seducing my sweet sister! To the point where she's so enamored with him, she's got a ring on her finger and plans to have a child in the near future!" he turned to his companions one after another, staring at them soulfully. "Can you believe that!?"

Thankfully for his sanity and the peace between the Devils and the Kuoh Clan, Sirzechs didn't precisely know how far along those plans were, nor the fact that Rias was actually already pregnant. Not that this was any of his business, but Rias well understood how her sis-con of a

brother would react to that news. She planned for her and Harry to have a formal wedding before Sirzechs or her parents learned of it, at which point they could stuff it as far as Rias was concerned.

Rolling his eyes at his friend, Ajuka shared a glance with Falbium, and as one, the two men slapped Sirzechs hard on the shoulders. Since he wasn't wearing his official Maou outfit with its heavily overdone shoulder pauldrons and spikes, this did the trick. Well, that and the fact Ajuka and Falbium were able to put a hell of a lot more strength into the strikes than their bodies would make you think. Falbium wasn't in the same Super Devil territory as the other two, but he was still a Maou for more than the fact the other three trusted him.

"Enough of that. It isn't as if the whole teacher-student thing hasn't happened hundreds, thousands of times in devil society, and their actual age difference isn't all that large. Hell, Grayfia's what, twenty years older than you? To devils, age really isn't relevant," Ajuka grumbled to his best friend. "Frankly, given everything that Harry's done for your sister and through her the rest of our race, I think you being irritated with how serious their relationship is a small heh, cross to bear." *And I know it's just an act at this point anyway, you ass. That doesn't mean I'm going to go along with it.*

Falbium had even less willingness to let Ajuka slip into silly mode, not even bothering to groan at Ajuka's wording. "You've known about their relationship a long while, and you've approved of it most of that time. You're going to have to come up with another way to let your inner child out, Sirzechs."

Sirzechs grumbled for a few moments but his two friends turned away, and Sirzechs, sighing, moved after them until he was between the two once more. After a few moments, rather than return to the previous topic of conversation, Falbium looked sideways at Sirzechs and spoke up about the particulars of the plan they had set in motion to trap at least a few of their hidden foes. "You know, I went along with your plan to allow those two youngsters to get their hands on what our enemies need to enter Cocytus because we're certain Cao-Cao and his bloc from the Khaos Brigade need to get into Cocytus. I also agree with the logic that tells us the two shapeshifting humans still have their fingers in that particular pie as well as perhaps agents among our own people and could be after the same thing."

Falbium shivered for a moment, interrupting whatever thought he was following to look over at Ajuka. "Ughh...have you finished those shapeshifting detectors of yours? The idea that there are two humans out there whose ability to shapeshift can fool so many people, devil, Sacred Gear user, human, and so forth is nightmare-inducing."

He was taking it as a given that the Khaos Brigade would have ways of discovering duplicity or spies among their own folk and might well have access to a bigger bag of tricks than

the devils did in terms of magic and runes. And that Nefertiti and Akhenaten had overcome them. An assumption that worried him intensely in his position as Minister of Military Affairs. Despite his laziness, Falbium took his position and his duty seriously when he had to.

"I'm close but not quite there. Give me another week or two of **uninterrupted** time, and I should finish them," Ajuka snorted, his emphasis on that word bringing snorts from his companions. "Thankfully, Tonks, that wizard girl with the bubble-gum colored hair, has the same Metamorph ability. She even allowed me to study it for a time yesterday, and with that as a basis, I know where my research in that direction needs to head. It's just creating the device and making sure it works that I'm behind on. I've had other things on my mind, you know?"

His companions had to ruefully acknowledge as simple truth, the moment of humor from a second before fading under that reality. The three of them have been incredibly busy over the past few days.

Shrugging that off, Falbium turned back to his earlier thought. "But you do know that if Ophis or even Cao-Cao or some of the other bloc leaders within Khaos Brigade find out they've been led into a trap, they might think that our little birdies turned on them on their own. Which might have dire consequences for the youngsters. It's not like you to willingly sacrifice someone like that."

"I didn't become Maou Lucifer by always being nice," Sirzechs retorted mildly, although it was true it went against the grain to sacrifice anyone, especially another devil like they might be forced to. *To say nothing of the risk of what they carry changing hands. But if it works, it will be worth it.* "Besides, Roygun and Bedeze, they made their beds," he said aloud before grimacing. "I'd really, **really** like to move on the individual who so carefully cultivated that pair, but without more evidence, I don't see that happening."

"Evidence like reacquiring one of the stolen King Pieces from one of them?" Ajuka asked dryly, but with an actual bite to his voice as his face grew a little annoyed, speaking of one of the worries Sirzechs had wrestled with when it came to this plan.

While Harry, Rias and those that made up their immediate group had, of course, been busy with things on Earth, there had been other events going on at the same time in the Underworld they hadn't had any involvement in. One of which was the discovery of the theft of the so-called King Pieces.

These pieces were very different than what Ajuka called his Anchor Pieces, the central pieces to the Rating System tied into every individual devil who received a Chess Set. These were the chess pieces that allowed a devil to turn members of other races into devils. This change, in turn, made them subordinate to the original devil, so long as the central devil, the one with the Anchor Piece, remained stronger, magically speaking, than his or her subordinates.

If a subordinate devil got too strong and could not be upgraded to another piece for some reason, then the stronger devil could easily break away from the king in question normally through force, although occasionally, the stronger devil was allowed to go free or earned the right to his own Chess Set.

Indeed, the Anchor Piece wasn't even a real physical chess piece. That was simply an easy way to describe it. Rather, it described a series of enchantments tying the person given the Chess Box to the pieces within, allowing them to manipulate the pieces in question. And contrary to many a person's belief, there was no real mental component to a connection between the King and his or her pieces. Nor did going through with being tied into a Chess Set truly give any kind of power up. It was simply what the name implied, an anchor, a central pillar that all the other pieces of the Chess Set tied into.

The King Pieces that Ajuka had crafted several decades after creating the rating system were extremely different. So different that he had locked them away as powerful military items that shouldn't be used under any circumstances, a state secret known, he had long thought, to only himself and the other three Maou. Unfortunately, that had, several months back, proven to not be the case.

Essentially, the King Pieces were the ultimate expression of the Mutated Piece concept. Yet instead of giving just a massive power-up or being strong enough to contain the energies of more powerful creatures into a more reasonable shape, the King Pieces, which were not part of any Chess Set but rather single items, brought out a person's ultimate potential. The user of such a piece, once bonded with it, instantly reached the height of his abilities and power.

The output varied from person to person. If someone like Ajuka or Sirzechs, for instance, had one, it might not amount to much. Both of them were already at the pinnacle of what they could achieve in terms of natural talent and lifetimes of intense training and effort. For someone who didn't have any potential, the outcome would be much the same. But for someone who did have a lot of potential and who simply hadn't reached the limits of it yet, the King Piece became the ultimate shortcut.

And two of them had been stolen from Ajuka's secure vault. How that had been accomplished, Ajuka didn't know even now months after having discovered the theft. Even knowing about the pieces wouldn't be enough, the thief would need to get past Ajuka's security, which should have been impossible without tripping even one alarm. *Then again, I've recently learned there are far more sensor-type runic arrays out there than I ever knew about before, and ways to hide from our own I had not considered,* Ajuka reflected ruefully.

At the time, the decision had been made to keep the discovery of that theft under wraps. After all, the King Pieces were not supposed to exist at all and since Serafall had been

deep into peace talks with the Church and the Fallen at the time, telling them that the devils had created a magical object which would be able to increase their military potential several times over if mass-produced was not something that any of the Maou had wanted to even consider.

Since then, a clandestine counter espionage operation had begun, led by some of Falbium's underlings who he trusted implicitly. They still had no idea how the actual theft had been achieved, but the Four Maou now understood who had been behind it and who had been pulling the strings of such a thing: the Bael Clan's 'retired' clan head, Zekram.

He was a political creature of the first degree, with connections and spies everywhere, and behind the scenes, Zekram led the 'loyal opposition' party among the Pillar Clans. This was a political party that, while acknowledging the need for the Rating System and the primacy of power, still felt that traditions, nobility and being 'pureblooded' devils counted for just as much. They accepted the need to turn humans and others into devils but felt that such should never be allowed to grow stronger than the nobles of the Pillar Clans.

Through his connections and spy network, Zekram had somehow discovered the existence of the King Pieces and then 'guided' two young up-and-coming devils, Roygun Belphegor and Bedeze Asmodeus, into first stealing (although, again, who and how had done that was a mystery), then using them in the Rating Game tournaments that were going on all the time throughout the Underworld. They weren't at the top of that sport, but they were nearly there and had begun to rise through the ranks far faster than simple training or adding new members to their peerages could account for.

While the King Piece was a standalone enchanted object if it was used by someone with the Anchor Enchantment on them connecting them, in turn, to a set of Rating Pieces, those individuals also partook in a power-up. To a far lesser degree, admittedly, but that hardly mattered. A Rating Game did not end until the enemy King surrendered or was 'killed'. If the king on one side had become by far the most powerful piece on the board, well, the outcome was obvious.

"I'm just wondering how certain we are that it will be the Khaos Brigades Cao-Cao that will attack Cocytus rather than the Old Satan Faction. While they still lack leaders as far as we can tell, maybe Zekram has--" Falbium began, but Sirzechs interrupted him, shaking his head.

"Zekram's no fool. He doesn't believe in that pureblood nonsense any more than I do. No, it's about **power** with him. I don't know what specific political scheme he was coming up with when he decided to push those young idiots into taking up the cause, but I'm certain that it isn't personal to him. And you know that his hatred for some of the Old Satan Faction members

would keep him from working with them anyway, even if he hadn't backed us in the civil war due to his family's ties with my own."

"Zekram also came to hate the war against the other factions, from what I remember," Ajuka added.

"That too." While Zekram had loathed the Four Maou at the time personally, that would not have been enough to force him to work against them had Zekram also not understood that restarting the war would have led to the devil race's extinction. *Mind you, that was before Ajuka came up with the Rating System. I... hmm... no. No, I don't think he is a warmonger, even with that advantage on our side.*

"No, he's trying to harness the underlying resentment that many of the low-ranking and middle-ranking devils feel towards the new blood," Sirzechs stated aloud. "Instead of pushing for some kind of violent conflict between the purebloods and the newly turned devils, he's just making certain that society doesn't change to give the turned devils more advantages. He wants to solidify the Bael Clan's position as the center of the loyal opposition both politically and socially. He hoped to create his own young leaders which he could mold and shape to offset individuals like Rias-tan and Sona, who have looked for power and allies outside devil-kind."

"... Most of that flew right over my head, and I'm very, very grateful for it. I'm no politician, thank the darkness," Ajuka answered, something Falbium wholeheartedly agreed with. "Yet what changed your mind about Roygun and Bedeze? When we talked about them after learning they might possess my King Pieces, you had no intention of doing anything negative toward them. Even when it became clear that they had made contact with the Khaos Brigade, either on their own or through Zekram, that hadn't changed. And do we have any idea on that point yet?"

"We don't know even now if Zekram's somehow funneling information or what-have-you to the Khaos Brigade. He might be. We just don't know. Bedeze and Roygun's connection, however, we were able to discover," Falbium answered as Sirzechs fell silent, his shoulders drooping a little. "As for why Sirzechs and I both decided the pair had become expendable, well, above and beyond it now being a necessity, did you ever hear about the Cleria Belial case?"

"Um... yes?" Ajuka had to think for a moment, as he really didn't follow most news, not even news about the Underworld, all that closely. "Er... if I remember correctly, Cleira was one of the brightest young girls of her age group, around Rias's age, or maybe a little older? Wasn't she killed by the church along with her boyfriend, who was a church member? That happened... What, nearly a year ago, now, I think."

"Yes, but while it was the church that did the deed, Roygun and Bedeze were the ones who informed the Church of what was going on somehow through a few humans who had

made contracts with them.” Rivezem sighed. “Even the boy’s direct superior had no idea that he was involved with the devil, and she’d made no effort whatsoever to turn him. The church would never have found out if not for them, and both lovers died for it. Because apparently, Cleria had somehow discovered that the King Pieces existed.”

“Okay, how the incubus humping, dragon diddling **fuck** did a young girl like Cleria learn about them!?” Ajuka growled, throwing his hands into the air, showing more animation than he normally would about anything beyond a science project he was working on. “Freaking damn it, my lab’s not a damn sieve, but seriously!”

“The same source that told Zekram about it. One I’ve had silenced since. Surely even you, Ajuka, absent-minded scientist as you are, noticed that one of your initial helpers, one of the people who helped set up that lab of yours after the war, is no longer around... right? As for Cleria, we discovered her death was suspicious when her cousin Diehauser confided in Serafall his suspicions about her death. Serafall came to some of my subordinates and asked them to look into it.” This was all said in a bland tone, both Falbium’s admitting that he had someone that had originally worked for Ajuka killed for selling secrets and the fact that he had not been approached by the other devil kin and that all of the work since been done by his subordinates. Falbium had never shirked from the dirty parts of his job, while at the same time being very upfront about the fact he could rarely be made to care about doing it properly.

The blank look that Ajuka gave Falbium had Sirzechs rolling his eyes, and the redhead admitted to himself, not for the first time, that both of his friends had issues when it came to being leaders. *I knew when I took this role that’d be the case, but come on!*

“So yes, although it pains me to let it happen if it does, as Roygun has shown all the signs of being an excellent leader and a role model for younger devils in the future if the opposition decides to move against her in some fashion, I’m not going to shed any tears,” Sirzechs admitted.

“I notice you didn’t mention Bedeze just then,” Ajuka pointed out.

“No, I didn’t. Hanging that egotistical little cunt out to dry is just a bonus.”

Both of his friends laughed, but then Ajuka brought up another point. “You know, instead of trying this mad scheme that Rias and Harry’s research group has come up with, we could simply transfer to Danan. Admittedly, connecting the Underworld to Danan or just re-creating our own pocket dimension there would be horrifyingly difficult, but we could just live on Danan. There’s more than enough space there, after all.”

The process of creating permanent pocket dimensions had been lost among the Devils with the death of the original Lucifer. He had created the Underworld in the first place

somehow when he had reached into the hungry nothingness between dimensions to craft a woman for himself in order to birth the devil race when the fallen had proven to be flawed. Both processes had died with him, something that the current Lucifer was incredibly happy about.

He also knew that Ajuka was right. There were only around three hundred and twenty thousand devils all told. They were spread out, sure. Having seven semi-separate smaller dimensions ranging from the size of Brazil to that of America wound into one would allow for that. And there would be the whole ecosystem of the Underworld to think of if it came to needing to move from the Underworld to Danan. The trees, the animals, the familiars and so forth would need to come along with the actual people who relied on all that to live. But even then, there wouldn't be enough of them to make an impact on Danan as a whole. An entire world, young, vibrant and full of magic.

Yet even though he occasionally had a bout of wanderlust when he considered Danan, Lucifer could not stop himself from laughing at the very suggestion. "Can you imagine what Zekram and the other old lords would think about living alongside humans once Harry's colonization project gets going? Or the fey? I don't know which would be worse, the endless taunting, pranking and mind games the Fey would hit us with, or the attempts to exterminate them in turn. Also, remember, they'd have to live under a new pantheon. Unless you really think that Rias-tan, let alone Harry, would simply take a hands-off approach to an entire civilization moving into their realm? Heck, even most of the New Satan Faction wouldn't want to do that. We're all too touched by the Sin of Pride."

"It could give Zekram and his ilk heart attacks, though," Falbium said, which caused Sirzechs to laugh again and Ajuka to join in. The trio continued to walk in silence for a moment before Ajuka brought up an earlier point that seemed to have been bothering him a little bit. "But seriously, who leaked the news about the King Pieces? I've been going through my mind, and I can't remember anyone on my team from back then going missing."

"Do you even know the names of your helpers, let alone what they look like?" Falbium asked tartly.

"Oh, that's rich coming from you, the poster child for figureheads everywhere! These past two days, when you've actually had to do real work, are you feeling all right? Your heart isn't about to give out on you, or are you about to go into hibernation or something in order to recoup your strength?" Ajuka shot back while Sirzechs shook his head. He had some very strange friends, but he wouldn't trade them for the world, and their back and forth was soothing right now.

The three of them looked around at the noise of someone coming towards them. Around a few man-sized shrubs, Harry and Cú Cuchulain appeared, walking towards the trio of Maou. Both of them looked tired, and their hands were twitching a bit. All three Maou noticed, and Falbium nodded his head sagely. "Ah, writers cramp. I've had that before."

"When have you ever had that, you lazy ass," Sirzech snorted before waving a hand in greeting to Harry. "Harry. You two finished, I take it?"

"For now. And after this I will need a few days without needing to write a single rune. You'd think the two of us would be immune to getting sore hands, but no."

"Bah, it's the feckin' stone we had to etch into, I tell ya. I know this whole place is unnatural, but Cocytus, that place takes it to a whole new level. And putting down the same arrays each time, ugh. I ain't a machine Potter, and I will for damn sure be demandin' some alcoholic remuneration," Cú grumbled.

Seeing the confusion on Sirzechs' face, Harry explained. "We talked about it and felt that we'd put down enough trap arrays before. So today, we concentrated entirely on sensor arrays. And the ones smallest and hardest to notice, to boot."

"Ah, those. The ones you tested for me and Warden Alvenhov yesterday?" Falbium shook his head. "I still don't like the fact none of our own magic or sensor-style wards could find you when you were using that invisibility mist of yours. That was quite a shock, as was how well so-called simple wizard-style Disillusion spells worked, especially when the user was standing still."

"Exactly. And then there's short-range Apparition to consider, and that's not even mentioning the kind of Egyptian spells at least two of the people we want to catch can call on," Harry agreed. "But those runic arrays are small, finicky and really annoying."

"Well, far be it for me to be a poor host. If you both want, I have access to quite a large supply of wine and other things," Sirzechs announced, leading the way back to the Gremory mansion. "Did you decide who is going to be involved in this ambush, Harry?"

"We did. Rias didn't like it, but she's still a better leader across the board when it comes to what is going on in Kuoh. With the MACUSA magineers arriving, the logistics side of prepping for the ritual and liaising with Egypt and the Wizarding World. Yasaka was almost roped into helping her but was able to delegate enough. And I cannot say enough about Sona's help in organizing and the paperwork aspect," Harry supplied, smiling faintly as he and Cú fell into step with the other three men. "We've decided on our team and our roles. Now, all we need to do is wait."

“And I do so hate waiting,” Sirzechs said, sighing faintly, something all the other men agreed with ruefully.

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Actually, Sirzechs would not have to wait for very much longer because at the same time that he and the others returned to the Gremory mansion, the last bit of information that Cao-Cao and Rivezem were waiting for was already in their hands as the two met once more in Rivezem’s mansion. A mansion that was feeling quite full, to Cao-Cao’s senses. “You’ve been busy, Rivezem. I think I saw at least two magicians from the Old Satan Faction I’ve also seen in the halls of the Khaos Brigade’s base on our walk here.”

“Hah. Well, they are all young, and with youth comes a certain amount of assumed infallibility. But when an older statesman like I give my advice, they are certain to follow... with the correct pressure,” Rivezem smiled thinly, his reflecting a certain amount of violence hidden behind his simple words before turning his attention to two of the newcomers who had arrived with Cao-Cao. The others... their presence told Rivezem that Cao-Cao had not entirely been forthright with him in their previous meetings about lacking heavy hitters, but these two were different.

Both were in their late twenties, fit and hardy. The man of the pair was blonde, his hair was kept in a well-cared-for coif, while he wore attire almost matching Rivezem’s in cut, with a startlingly white cravat on a black shirt and jacket paired with red pants. His stance had been haughty and almost dismissive until Euclid bowed him in, Cao-Cao and the rest of his folk into Rivezem’s sitting room. Now, the young man was staring at Rivezem in shock, and the older Devil took a certain amount of pleasure out of the look of fear and awe on the youngster’s face.

The other, a young woman, was looking almost dreamily at Euclid as he returned to his master’s side. She was, Rivezem acknowledged, a beautiful young woman appearing in her twenties with long, wavy, cherry blossom hair and two horns protruding from her head, matching the young man’s single horn jutting from his forehead, showing she too was a devil, hence Rivezem’s interest. She wore a set of armor that was cut to provide very little in the way of actual protection, showing off a well-endowed bust, slim waist, and powerful thighs.

Even more than the fact both were devils and had arrived with Cao-Cao, it was the fact that Rivezem knew who they were that had caught Rivezem’s interest, and had stopped his cutting banter with Cao-Cao. For they were becoming quite famous in the Rating Game circuit. The Rating Circuit and the fights within were really the only good thing that the New Devil Party had created since winning the civil war, and Rivezem often enjoyed watching the fights, fake though the blood and pain might be.

Roygun Bellphegor sighed faintly in mock-sadness, ignoring the tension in the room between Cao-Cao and the ancient relic they had apparently come to meet, as well as the look of awe on her so-called companion's face. Instead, she addressed Euclid. "It really is too bad you're so old, Euclid Lucifuge. I might ask your master if I could have you transfer to my household instead. I wonder if there's any magic that would allow me to see what you looked like when you were younger. But fourteen, that would be even better! Oooh, having a little butler like that, one with your looks, would be amazing. I doubt I'd ever leave the mansion ever again, and I would make certain you wouldn't either."

"I assure you my master would never cast me aside like that, you shotacon," Euclid shot back, shaking his head. "Keep your perversions to yourself. This is not the place for it."

"Hah, you use the human term for my particular fetish? Fascinating, considering the age of consent has only recently been a thing among devils," Roygun teased. It was supposed to be a gentle tease, but Euclid acted as if she'd slapped him, reeling back and his face closing down into hard, bitter lines, and she sighed faintly. "So against human ideas, you're no fun."

"As amusing as it is to see someone get under Euclid's skin on another topic other than his dearly estranged sister, and as interesting as it is to see you, Cao-Cao, willing to rub elbows with two more devils despite your own hatred towards nonhumans, we alas need to move on," Rivezem sighed. It really was a shame, as nothing brought him more pleasure than using his words to cut a person where it would hurt the most. "You were also the one who said you had to act under a time limit. "Did you bring the items that we need?"

Nodding curtly, Cao-Cao looked over to Roygun and Bedeze. "Show him."

Roygun rolled her eyes and muttered something under her breath about all work and no play while Bedeze nodded hastily. "Of course! If I had known, if that is, if all of those of us who believe in the true right of the nobility to lead and remain on top of society knew that there was a living Lucifer around, I would have..."

"You would still be suckling at the new Lucifer's cock," Rivezem drawled, waving the youth to silence, a sneer on his face as he made his words deliberately provocative. "Do not act as if it would be otherwise. But I am quite amused that old Zekram let the two of you off your leashes long enough to reach out to the Khaos Brigade, or perhaps, heh, you did so at his instigation. That old schemer only cares about gathering more power for his clan and does not care from where that power comes from."

While most would've thought Rivezem spoke those last few sentences with contempt, it was actually with a quite respectful tone of voice that he spoke of the ancient 'former' head of the Bael Clan, made all the more jarring by his previous acerbic words. Former for a given value, as Zekram was rarely seen in public these days, so to most people, he was simply retired, an

elderly devil spending his time in the library organizing books, the scrolls and books of the Bael Clan into digital format.

However, those who knew the man personally, as Rivezem had once, understood that he still held the reins of power within the Bael Clan, using his son as a mere mouthpiece. And at times, a mouthpiece that could say far more than the older man would allow himself to say in public. The only surviving clan head from the three-way war with the forces of heaven and the fallen, Zekram was a cunning old goat, Rivezem reflected.

Roygun smiled in amusement, taking no umbrage at Rivezem's statement, while Bedeze scowled. In the next second, his magical aura flared up as he glared at the older man. Rivezem simply stared back at him, the lazy look of an old volume to a younger one. *He is surprisingly strong, up to Euclid's level and perhaps beyond. But that is nothing to me.* "You've got some power to you boy, but you are in my castle now, and my allies are also around us, whereas you will stand alone if you cause trouble here. Or do you think that Cao-Cao will take your side in a conflict? How low have you fallen to put your faith in a human."

"Enough," Cao-Cao growled, gesturing his three lieutenants forward. Each of the other humans he had brought along was the descendent of a hero. Hercules and Perseus had the same names as their ancestors, while Connla the descendent of Cú Cuchlain, did not. Normally, he and Perseus wouldn't associate with Cao-Cao openly, remaining in the neutral block of the Khaos Brigade and mostly stationed at bases in the European theater.

Cao-Cao had never wanted his true strength to be known to anyone else in the Khaos Brigade, let alone someone as deceitful as Rivezem. Yet Cao-Cao had created his own Hero Bloc nearly from the moment he had been brought into the Khaos Brigade and had tendrils in all the bases that still remained uncompromised at this point. Perseus had actually been his first recruit and was far more loyal to Cao-Cao than Hercules, who associated with him openly. Hercules was too vain, too arrogant and far too destructive to be let out on his own.

Perseus was one of Cao-Cao's most intelligent friends, and he had operated mainly independently of Cao-Cao for more than a year and a half now. It was through him that Cao-Cao had recruited Connla, the descendent of Cú Cuchulain, into the Hero Bloc, giving him three other heavy hitters to call on. Not only were they all descendants of heroes and had skills and abilities because of that, their Sacred Gears also harkened back to those past heroes.

Connla and Martin weren't as loyal as Perseus, yet willingly followed Cao-Cao as a fellow descendant of a famous hero known for his ability with strategy and tactics. All of them wished to become as well known and nearly deified as their ancestors and also loathed nonhumans, just like Cao-Cao.

“The last thing we can have is you devils having a falling out on the eve of our most important mission. We are here to get a task done. Breaking into Cocytus will take both of our forces, and we cannot limit our strengths by allowing ego to get in the way,” Cao-Cao growled.

Once more, Rivezem wondered what Cao-Cao was after in Cocytus before deciding he didn't really care. So long as he had his own prize from within that depository, that was all to the good. He looked back at Bedeze and Roygun, reflecting again on what he knew of the two, as well as the individual pulling their strings. *Two quickly rising stars of the Rating Games, one who is known to do it for fun and with no peerage of her own. The other who has stated several times that the Rating Games are the penultimate sign of the noble's authority and prestige. He has a peerage but treats them more like servants and disposal troops than anything else. His ruthlessness and the bloody manner of his battles are a major draw for the crowd. Looking at him in person, it's simple to see it's the sin of jealousy rather than pride that drives him.*

Remembering a recent newspaper article, he'd read that stated Diehauser Belial had defeated the latest attempt by Bedeze Abaddon to take his crown as the reigning champion of the Rating Games. *A pity Diehauser rejected Euclid's offer to introduce him to a powerful backer. I suppose that sending Euclid there right after he got back from the meeting with Ophis was a mistake. A man missing an arm wasn't exactly the sign of strength I had hoped for. Perhaps I should have gone alone, but the Belial clan is too friendly with the Sitri Clan for that.*

Regardless, Rivezem was almost tempted to poke fun at the man again before shaking that thought off. “Cao-Cao is right, I suppose. I do find it fascinating, however, how you have both grown to such strength in little under four months since entering the Rating Game. Deihauser Belial has reigned supreme at the top of the Rating Game tournament for over ten years. Yet you have gotten close to catching up to him in less than three.”

Just like Rivezem knew it would, his words acted like a treat given to a dog. Bedeze puffed up proudly, holding up his hand as he declared, “Ha, with the power of the King Piece, anything is possible!”

The man's aura, which had been flickering back into nonexistence, now seemed to pulse from the rest of his body into his hand. An eyeblink later, a large red chess piece about the size of his fists pressed one on top of another appeared in his open palm. It was shaped to look like a man on a horse with a crown on his head marked out by spikes while wearing a sword and shield.

Ignoring the groan from his companion, Bedeze explained what it was, shouting aloud that it would be the key to his ascension over Deihauser. “I will show him and the lowly Belial clan that my clan deserves to be one of the Pillar Clans far more than they, that we have true, noble blood in our veins while he is nothing more than a mongrel from a mongrel house!”

Setting aside the apparent sophistry in the man's statement and his desires for the future, Rivezem's eyes glittered predatorily, hidden as he turned aside to take up a wine bottle. Turning around, he had schooled his expression back to its normal passive, thinly veiled condescension as he held it up to his guests. *Now, isn't that **fascinating**? Carefully, carefully Rivezem. After all, you don't know if the King Piece will survive if its current user dies abruptly. On the other hand, what would I have to lose? Heh.* "I see. That sounds interesting, and I wish you luck in the future. Although, are you going to be part of our escapade today?"

"They will. After all, Bedeze and Roygun are the ones who were able to discover the final piece we needed to enter Cocytus and get back out again," Cao-Cao stated firmly.

"Yes, it's always getting out from Cocytus that has been the issue," Rivezem nodded affably, moving on quickly lest either of these two suddenly realize his interest in the King Piece, an item he had never even heard about before. *Zekram, you old goat, to be able to first discover such a thing that even my spies or those of Old Satan Faction had never discovered! I wonder, did you first think that you would be able to replicate whatever manner of enchantment the King Piece is, and then only gave it out to these two in order to push your political agenda as much as you could? Or are you just using these two to remind everyone that it's demonic blood, which is the most powerful, despite all the rumors coming from the human world and the young Gremory girl's new alliances? Are you setting these two up to be your future leaders of devil-kind while you pull their strings all the while? Fascinating to think about, truly, not that it matters much at the moment.*

"But what exactly is the item that we so require?" he said aloud

At that, Roygun and Bedeze both reached into their pockets and then held out their hands, the King Piece having disappeared from Bedeze's hand back into his body a moment ago. In their palms, the two younger devils held what looked for all the world like simple bracelets made of hemp rope. The items were simple, just rough circles made of rope, without any kind of accouterment or addition to make them look better, which made them stand out all the more in the austere but richly appointed sitting room and those within.

Rivezem blanked, staring at them, then over at Cao-Cao. "Seriously?" His shock was so great that he couldn't even make his tone biting or derogatory in any way, and his single word came out in the most deadpan tone Cao-Cao had ever heard as the old devil's mind seemed to have skipped a gear for a moment. "I mean, seriously?"

It was Roygun who answered this time, smiling and nodding. "It is indeed. These two bits of rope are connected to the greater whole deep within Cocytus via the Rule of Similarity. Anyone who enters must have such a bracelet on their person, or else you'll get lost in Cocytus."

“... I see. Cocytus’s mysterious creator truly leaned heavily into that human myth of the Minotaur’s Maze, didn’t they,” Rivezem murmured, suddenly understanding. “But how did you two get your hands on these? And where did you get your information from?”

“The information came from me from a reliable source,” Cao-Cao interjected. “It was a business transaction, nothing more.” *Although I still don’t know why or how in the world Akhenaten knew what knowledge I needed, but thankfully what he got in return was nothing serious... I think.*

“As for getting our hands on them, one of the members of my clan works at the prison complex as a guard. He was willing to pass two of them on to me in return for a... paid vacation to the human world,” Bedeze stated with a snicker, causing Rivezem to frown and Cao-Cao to shake his head, coming out of his suddenly concerned thoughts.

“Don’t,” he said, holding up her hand before Rivezem could speak. “Bedeze is making it seem **far** easier than it actually was. The man in question was due to go on a proper vacation before we kidnapped him and enspelled to give them over. We’d been trying for months to corrupt him via the normal vices all devils have through Bedeze and the rest of his clan, yet in the end, he would not have been able to give them over to anyone thanks to a slave tattoo that all the guards there have to wear. Once we had kidnapped him, Roygun’s Crack Magic was able to shatter the slave tattoo, and a few wizards among my employees were able to override the spell on the man’s mind so he would give us the two bracelets in his possession of his own free will. If he didn’t, they would apparently have burst into flame.”

“And while he’s on a paid vacation in the human world, it’s one of those vacations that he’ll never return from,” Hercules supplied with a smirk, having been the one to organize that aspect.

That allayed some of Rivezem’s concerns. For all that he hated Sirzechs and Ajuka with a passion, he did not think they, or indeed any of the four new Maou, were stupid. Thankfully, it seemed as if getting these two rope bracelets had indeed been a long project. “Excellent. And you need skilled enchanter in order to copy these bracelets, correct?” That was a request Cao-Cao had made after his last visit several days back.

“Yes and no. We need to copy the Art of Similarity, I suppose you could call it,” Roygun said, frowning a little. “We tried to actually copy the rope knots themselves both via Devil magic and Wizarding Style magics. Yet, as puissant as the wizards are at such things, the copies always seemed to dissolve for some reason. Whether or not that’s thanks to the existing enchantment on them or maybe a secondary enchantment, I don’t know. But there’s a sharp limit to what we can do once in the prison with only two of them.”

“And assuming that we can go in and take more bracelets from the guards when we attack the prison is not going to happen. Regardless, I have come here with my ally, Rivezem. I trust that the members of the Old Satan Faction I saw on the walk here from your gate aren’t the only ones?” Cao-Cao nearly demanded.

“Hah, no. You have yet to see the back of my mansion, have you? And while you seem to have brought the cream of your crop, where is the rest of your harvest?” Rivezem taunted. “Surely you do not think that only we devils will be bringing along normal troops for this little endeavor.”

“No, you will not be. If you’ll allow it, my companion Connla can create a teleportation array to bring the rest of our forces to meet us here,” Cao-Cao answered instantly. Connla had a mastery of runes that harkened back to some legends about his ancestors, although he had needed to be taught them in the first place. Connla had no kind of genetic knowledge of runes or anything like that, as Perseus did when it came to how to use his Sacred Gear.

Not even trying to get out of it, or to allay my concerns, if I had any, for the idea that it will be the foot troops of the Old Satan Faction who pay the price for our breaking into Cocytus? He truly is concerned, Rivezem thought with some amusement. Indeed, Cao-Cao and all of his lieutenants seemed tense, eager to get about it and fearful of something all at once. Cao-Cao was just far better at hiding it than the others, with Perseus especially looking worried and out of sorts. *Well, far be it from me to stop them from, as the new devils would say, putting more money on the table.*

A door to the sitting room opened then, and two other men entered holding wine glasses of their own, only to freeze as they saw Cao-Cao and those with him, their eyes widening, then narrowing in speculation, something that Cao-Cao’s did as well as he gazed back at them. “Oh, ho. I see you were not as open as you wanted me to assume about your lack of ongoing connection to the other leaders of the Old Satan Faction.”

These two men were three of the leaders among the Khaos Brigade of the Old Satan Faction. Shalba Beelzebub had the appearance of a handsome man dressed in black armor with a cape. He had surprisingly long brown hair that went down to his hips, with bangs covering his right eye. He wore a good suit of armor, which looked like it had been made entirely for him. *Shalba at least looks respectable, while Creuserey always reminds me of a random dark elf ranger or thief character from fantasy novels,* Cao-Cao mused.

Like his companion, Creuserey had the appearance of a good-looking man who wore the clothes of a noble rather than armor. His clothing was entirely black with dark brown highlights. Creuserey also had a cape, black hair tied up in a small ponytail and violet eyes to go with pointy

ears and pale skin, hence the dark elf comparison that Cao-Cao and many others had made about the man.

Cao-Cao knew that Shalba had some decent personalized magic to them. Coming from the Beelzebub clan, he could call on the powers of bugs. He could summon bees and ants and use them to attack his enemies, or he could take on certain aspects of their abilities into his own body, making him physically several times stronger, say, if he took on the aspect of an ant or grow wasp-like poison stingers from his fingers or shoots out webs like a spider, among many other things. He also could use the typical elemental attacks of devils. Whereas Creuserey, well, he thought of himself as strong but could not call upon anything so personalized in terms of his magic. At least not to the best of Cao-Cao's knowledge.

After a round of introductions had been made, Rivezem led the way out of the sitting room. "Come. You can write out your teleportation array outside."

Moments later, Cao-Cao, Perseus and Hercules stood on a balcony overlooking a wide courtyard along with Rivezem, Shalba, Euclid and Crueserey. Actually, 'courtyard' implied something a bit too organized for what was below them. There was clear evidence of an outer wall that might have been in construction or been dismantled in the recent past, but beyond that and the faint hue of the ward line that hid Rivezem's mansions from discovery, nothing was separating it from the rest of Malebolge. Nothing but a teeming mass of demons.

Beyond their own magics, Katerea would have if she were there, both bore the tattoo of Ophis's draconic enhancement on their necks coiling up to their cheeks, something that Cao-Cao barely hid a sneer at. *The true power in such a relationship is never with the one who has accepted such a handout.* Like Euclid and Katerea, the two of them had gone to prostrate themselves before Ophis, although, unlike Katerea, they were rarely around after having turned over several thousand magicians who looked to them for their power. *And now perhaps I know why.*

"Hahah, well, again, as I said earlier. Sometimes, young people rebel. They will then need a... firmer hand to direct them back onto the right path."

The look Rivezem gave both young men had them visibly flinching almost to the point of spilling their wine. They looked like, Cao-Cao thought in amusement, beaten dogs. *That would have been very interesting to see.*

"They were outside observing the rest of our forces a moment ago," Rivezem said, waving back to the door the two men had used.

Then he frowned, looking back at Cao-Cao. "Where is Katerea? She did not respond to either of these two when they reached out to her at my behest."

Shalba spoke up then, his own voice showing a touch of true concern, if Cao-Cao was any judge. "Katerea has not been in contact with me or any of her own surviving clan members in nearly a week. She hasn't even been back to their mansion here in Malboge."

Survivors of the war against the previous quartet of Maou always used the word survivors when talking about their clans, as it was all too accurate. Shalba and Creuserey were the only survivors from their clans, which had once numbered in the dozens and hundreds. The Leviathan clan was lucky in that they had seven or nine, Cao-Cao wasn't certain, survivors beyond Katerea. She had kept them apart, and as far as Cao-Cao or anyone else in the Khaos Brigade knew, they were simply mid-to-low-level devils with no special combat ability.

"Katerea is busy." The bland response caused Rivezem to glare at Cao-Cao and the other two devils to scowl, but he shrugged. "Do not blame me. It's not my fault. She is working on something with a group of magical scientists and theorists on Ophis's specific demand." *And I'm not going to tell you who is involved in that or what they are researching.* There was no need for Rivezem to know, and frankly, while Cao-Cao needed Rivezem and his people to make this jailbreak a success, he trusted him about as much as a lion trusted a hyena. "They can't get away from the base at the moment, and Ophis is having them watched by one of her fellow Dragonkin."

This hint at the other dragons that Ophis had released from captivity (or revived; Cao-Cao still wasn't certain which term was more appropriate) had Rivezem nodding his head instantly. "That is understandable, I suppose." *Of all the youngsters who think they lead my faction, Katerea is the only one with some intelligence to her. She has no vision, and she is far more liable to bend to another's power, as shown in her interactions with Ophis when she and Euclid were sent to meet with the Khaos Brigade. But Katerea's power would've been useful, at least. Oh well, I still have the other two fools.* "For now, come with us, and you will see the rest of our forces."

Looking down, Cao-Cao had to admit that the Old Satan Faction had brought far more shock troops to the battle than he could. At least in terms of numbers, quality is another thing. He estimated there were at least six thousand devils ranging from a mid to low rank. Many of them showed the physical signs of nearly every Pillar or Extra devil clan Cao-Cao was aware of, bar the Bael, Gremory and Lucifer clans were represented here. Indeed, there were groups there that clearly made up entire clans of their own.

They were also all very obviously devils. Like Bedeze and Roygun, many had horns. Others had wings jutting from their backs as if they could not pull them inside like other devils. There were dozens of devils with scales, more with claws, others with eyes. There were even more than a hundred devils who looked more like gargoyles or imps than anything else and

others whose... devil attributes were more sexual in nature. These were the true dregs of Malboge, the forgotten, the devils who willfully rejected any movement towards being more human and hated the rest of their race for doing so.

Scattered among them were several hundred magicians. They stood in clumps of two or three, but they were there, the few magicians, humans who had made specific deals with devils in return for magical power, that looked to the Old Satan Faction and hadn't been sent to work with the Khaos Brigade.

"I am impressed. It looks as if you have enough firepower here to take on the prison yourself," Cao-Cao mused. He wasn't really impressed by the power of what he was seeing since he knew Rivezem alone could wipe all these devils out in an instant. But a bit of diplomacy went a long way.

With a wide smile that held an edge of vindictiveness, Rivezem waved around, indicating his troops. "That is an awfully nice thing of you to say, but if that is your way of attempting to get out of sending your own troops in with mine, think again. Remember, you are also supposed to provide troops for the direct assault."

Cao-Cao nodded agreeably and gestured for Connla to step forward, with Perseus following quickly.

The two of them were the only ones among his hero faction who really had an understanding of magic. Connla had begun to lean into it heavily nearly a year ago upon meeting Le Fey. She had mentioned that his ancestor had been known as a runemaster, and he'd invested heavily in it ever since, desiring to emulate the Shining Son of Lugh in every way he could. *Either that or as a way to get closer to Le Fey, in which case that failed the moment he was assigned back to work with Perseus in Europe. Blast it, I wish I could've convinced Arthur to come along with us. He is easily the most combat-effective of all of the other members of the hero faction, but he refuses to leave his sister's side except on Ophis's orders. And... it has to be said, he's closer to Vali than he is to me these days.*

Perseus was a young man who heavily leaned into his Greek heritage in terms of what he wore, wearing a hoplite armor set, complete with a shield and spear on his back and a short sword, a xiphos, at his side. Under his armor, Perseus wore regular pants instead of the short kilt that hoplites would've worn in battle, along with the top of a Greek high school he had been to at one point. His sacred gear was called Aegis Mineralization and was his shield. On the front side of the shield was the face of the gorgon, Medusa, which the original Perseus had killed. And just like the monster his ancestor had slain, that shield allowed Perseus to freeze to stone anyone who looked upon the shield once it's eyes were open. He had other abilities and was a fearsome spear wielder, as Cao-Cao could attest to, although his personal style was shield and

spear rather than spear as it was in Cao-Cao's case, made for straight-up combat against a sedentary opponent.

Much like Shalba and Creuserey, the comparison between Perseus and Connla could not have highlighted their differences anymore. Connla was an Irishman, although he hardly looked the part, having heavily tanned skin, with lank black hair, and deep black eyes, which he normally hid behind a pair of sunglasses. He was also loyal to Cao-Cao but was more of a dour sort of person.

Unlike Perseus and Cao-Cao, whose Sacred Gears took the form of weapons they wielded, Connla had the Sacred Gear called Night Reflection. This Sacred Gear was simply a pair of bracelets around his wrists that looked like they were made of stone, mostly hidden by his long sleeves. It allowed him to manipulate shadows, hiding himself in them and making them grow or take on physical form at will.

This he showed now. A long, thin rod of shadow appeared from his sleeve, stabbing down into the ground, where he began to write out a series of runes in an ever-increasing circle. Some of the surrounding devils moved to bother him or jeered, but they were quickly silenced by the one-armed Euclid, who had led the two Hero Bloc members down to the ground. Now, he froze several of the jeerers into statues, warning the others off.

"I take it you are creating a temporary teleportation tunnel," Shalba said, staring at the runes thoughtfully, having flown down to stand nearby, followed by the others. "Beyond the most basic of space-time manipulation, I've never gotten anything from that school. I even at one point thought of hiring a Gremory to try and teach me at, but decided against it, as I wasn't certain I could buy his silence."

"These don't have anything to do with the normal devil school of magic but that of my folk and Perseus's Celtic runes and Grecian knowledge," Connla said before falling silent, even those words having come out rough and almost condescendingly angry towards Shalba, who scowled at him.

"And your companions? He cannot help in such matters? Nor you?" Euclid asked, adding the last point more to get under Carson's skin than any real thought that he would help someone else.

"No. Neither of us has the skill with runes nor noncombat magics to help. Although, if you are bored, I could have Hercules spar with you for a bit. It would be fascinating to see how a one-armed ice user could fight someone whose magic allows him to create explosions."

Euclid scowled but did not rise to Cao-Cao's dig. For several moments, the main group of co-conspirators fell silent, while around them, the devils that the Old Satan Faction brought

together grumbled, growled and simply sat, waiting in large clumps around them. It was rather like an army camp, Cao-Cao realized, one that very much was a rabble. *But a useful one.*

For his part, Cao-Cao spent those few moments going over what he also knew from the prison, but more importantly, what his wizards had pulled from the mind of the prison guard that they had captured. As for Rivezem, he spent his time simply watching from the balcony, sipping wine. He sent several of his servants out to the camp below with wine and some food but simply remained there watching.

As his people worked, the growling, bitter tone of many of the conversations around them started to become louder. Some of them, no longer cowed by Euclid's earlier show of power, moved towards the heroes. These devils loathed humanity, and being so near humans without preying on them was a temptation that none could ignore.

But thankfully the work did not last very long. Soon, Connla looked up at Rivezem, with Perseus asking politely for him to lower the defenses of the mansion for a moment, which Rivezem, with a bit of reluctance, did. A moment later, a pulse of magic from Rivezem, as the owner of the house, Connla and Perseus, created a temporary runic doorway, linking the back entrance of the mansion to the distant Khaos Brigade main base.

And almost instantly, troops began to funnel through. They had been waiting for this moment, wary and afraid of being discovered by one of the dragons Ophis had brought to her side or any of the other Khaos Brigade members either truly loyal to her or too afraid to go against her. Many were, like Perseus and Connla, men and women who had not openly associated with Cao-Cao before, while most were. Indeed, he was bringing in a majority of the men and women who looked to him for leadership among the Khaos Brigade. It was a wrench, as he knew that many of them were going to die in the battle today, and still others might be left behind to either surrender or make their own way out of the prison.

Yet he felt that was a necessary sacrifice. *If I can obtain the Sacred Gear, Samael, any amount of sacrifice is worth it.*

Three hundred werewolves came through first, the vast majority of the Free Packs from Eastern Europe. Already in their beast forms, they looped along, their eyes a mixture of feral animal and human intelligence as they scanned the area, bigger and stronger than many of the devils there, causing several hundred of those devils to shift backward and others to sneer or grin in delight at the fight they could see coming.

Next came a few vampires, haughty and cold, their eyes and power making still more of the weaker devils twitching away. There were very few Nosferatan vampires willing to work with others, but these few had run into Cao-Cao on his numerous recruitment trips, and after he had beaten them into submission, they had agreed to work with him. Their weakness to sunlight

was a nonfactor in the Underworld, as was the same weakness they shared with the devils, Holy magic. They could also revive themselves from practically any death bar the complete annihilation of their bodies. *And of course, if they are hurt in a fight, there will be a source of blood readily nearby.*

Around eighty wizards and witches, the vast majority of those who remained within the Khaos Brigade after Ophis's deadly response to Akhenaten's betrayal came next. Most of these very human faces looked worried but resolute as they found themselves surrounded by a horde of demons, while a few of them even looked eager.

Cao-Cao gathered them to him with a wave of his hand. "Now that my own forces are here, I suggest we get our enchanters together. We need to copy those rope bracelets. My forces will set up a temporary camp to one side, well away from your followers."

Rivezem, who had floated down when the first werewolves showed up nodded. "Euclid, help them with that. Shalba, you're the more erudite of the pair of you. Show the enchanters to their fellows in the mansion."

At Cao-Cao's request, Rivezem had created a new wing of his mansion to allow for magical experiments prior to sending feelers out among his followers. His own folk who knew about magical theory, enchantment and so forth were already there, eighty more devils who lacked much when it came to combat but made up for it in other ways.

This process took far longer than Cao-Cao or anyone else had hoped. Hours dragged by, with Euclid Creuserey and Hercules all on duty to keep the peace between the two groups. Although badly outnumbered by the Old Satan Faction, the wizards, witches and the rest of Cao-Cao's troops did not back down and were tense and ready for a fight. The food that Rivezem offered everyone was barely enough to keep the two sides civil in the main, and several of those did break out, although the clashes were crushed by the leaders before they could get very far.

All while Rivezem watched from his perch on high, smirking.

It was pushing evening by the time the enchanters finally showed themselves, and Cao-Cao was pacing in the area between the two camps, his face frustrated. *Damn it, I know the man we took those bracelets from had gone on vacation, but with all the other magic protecting him, them and his knowledge of Cocytus, I cannot believe he doesn't have some kind of signal on him that will tell the Warden that he's dead. We need to hurry this up.*

"We've managed to do it," One of the wizards shouted, getting everyone's attention as he stumbled out of the mansion, looking exhausted. "We were able to, essentially, create shadow copies of the bracelets in question. They will link back to the bracelets and, through

them, can lead you out of the maze. The first... that part will hold up as long as nothing happens to the original rope bracelet. The last, we're not certain we'll be able to survive the long term once we enter a highly magical area like Cocytus."

"So people tied to those bracelets will be able to find the one wearing it rather than heading outside. Is the opposite true?" Rivezem asked.

Neither he nor any of the others there noticed the maid who had been on duty at the balcony being replaced by another. The two women exchanged faint scowls, but the original, seeing the battered nature of her replacement, said nothing, simply moving around her, leaving the new maid there.

"Yes. It will appear like gray lines in the air, visible to both the person with the original bracelet and everyone else tied into it."

"I see. In that case, I think I will take one, and Cao-Cao should take the other. That way, we can enchant them and tie our own forces solely to ourselves."

"Yes. We should also do so as quickly as possible. In fact, I think we need to start our assault now," Cao-Cao ordered. "Make certain all the enchanters can do the required spells. I will split them in half and send half to serve you, Rivezem. But we need to push on."

"Agreed," Rivezem mused. "Shalba, take a group of our flyers over to the transfer point. We will be there shortly. Make certain they don't have the chance to get any warning out to the Maous."

The transfer points were the large, football-sized areas where one level of the Underworld could be accessed by any of the others. Bar the one leading to the level that the Grigori had taken over centuries back they were all controlled by the devil's government. Here on Malboge, it was basically the only thing the government did control, and it was more of a military fort than a public distribution point like it was on other levels of the Underworld, a sign that the government understood how lawless Malboge was and how hated the New Devil-led government was here too.

Shalba nodded. "I can do that. My bug-related magic is good for distractions and grabbing people's attention."

The Beelzebub heir was as good as his word. The group was able to take over the fortress without a single warning leaving the fortress. It took the small army a bit to arrive, but when they did, they were quickly funneled through onto the large stony area that served Cocytus as the only connection between it and the other levels of the Underworld. Within moments of their arrival, Cao-Cao followed the first group of devils through the transfer zone.

The exterior of Cocytus was a literal mountain looming to one side of that entryway right away. The front of the mountain had been slagged from some serious exterior heat at some point, causing it to look as if the entire area had turned into molten lava before solidifying again. Into this huge stone face, a massive portcullis had been carved. On top, crenelations and battlements had also been crafted. In ancient times, before the remainder of Cocytus had been remade into a prison, that frontage had been for a fortress of some repute among devil-kind, the sight of a monstrous battle against the legions of heaven. It had since been turned to other purposes.

Having seen an image of it, Cao-Cao had once thought that the prison's exterior perhaps looked like something that J.R.R. Tolkien might've thought up, and later had not been surprised to learn that the creator had been a human. Nor, now, was he surprised when the attackers themselves began to be attacked the moment they appeared.

Dozens died in those first few seconds, mostly devils and a few magicians. The attackers spread out, going from a condensed block as they came out of the transfer zone to various smaller groups flying or running and shooting back up at the defenders. The battle spread far faster than any normal human commander could have anticipated, magic and the devil's normal physical advantages over humankind coming to the fore, and the deaths among the wizards and magicians escalated.

Not so the werewolves who dodged or simply took every spell sent their way, with the few vampires doing the same. It was they who were the first to alight on the wall, bringing the attack to the defenders.

"MOVE!" Cao-Cao roared, lashing out towards what looked like half a tower carved out of the living stone of the mountain to one side of the entryway. His spear, the True Longinus, struck, and the tower and large chunks of the wall shattered, turning into dust or debris. "In, in, in! Don't let them keep using the walls to their advantage; blast it all!"

The werewolves instantly obeyed. A few of them fell to conjured silver needles from their enemies, a few devils among the defenders having researched that difficult (for devils) magic. But the majority were able to rush over the pile of rubble, with more than a few climbing it to either side, closing with more of the guards on the wall. Meanwhile, more devils flowed forward. Those who could fly did so. Those who preferred the ground simply charge forward, lashing upwards with their own attack spells.

Cao-Cao ignored them. Gathering up his forces, he charged them forward into the breach he had created, letting Hercules and Connla take over attacking the guards. Soon, the majority of his forces were through to the other side of the curtain wall, pressing in against the thousands of defenders. Here, he lashed out with the True Longinus again, paving the way

forward by annihilating more than a thousand devils before they were in the area outside the prison where the guards actually spent most of their time. Here, the defense stiffened, slowing the Hero Bloc's advance but not stopping it as the walls had started to stop the majority of the attackers.

Then Rivezem appeared, coming out of the transfer point with the last of the devils and their so-called leaders, including Bedeze and Roygun. Roygun instantly took to the air, not engaging in combat until she came back down onto the defenders in the courtyard beyond the curtain wall. Her Crack Magic lashed out as she came down, making several large segments of the wall, letting in still more attackers.

Rivezem looked around for a moment, then rose into the air until he could see the gate. While Cao-Cao, Roygun and the others were attacking elsewhere, Rivezem disdained the old adage of striking where his enemy was weakest. *After all, they are all weak to me.*

Just like the rest of the curtain wall, the gateway was enspelled to have all the endurance of a true mountainside made of granite and stone with iron mixed in, supposedly resistant to both magical and non-magical means of entrance, only to an even larger degree. It had two large forbidding towers built up on the archway above, which were manned by Devils at all times, the source of several thousand deaths among the attackers at this point.

Rivezem's first attack slammed into and through the entire edifice, shattering its foundation and wiping out the gate, leading the rest to crash down, killing nearly every defender inside. "Forward!"

The devils of the Old Satan Faction howled in delight as they raced forward over the rubble. The defenders, now without their strongest defensive position, continued to fight doggedly, showing a willingness to fight against overwhelming odds despite everything. Even as they did, groups began to retreat towards the entryway into the prison. This was a series of cave-like entrances spread out over the face of the mountain beyond the curtain wall. Many of them closed soon after the defending devils retreated inward, leaving only one entrance inside the area directly behind the now-destroyed gate.

Hissing in annoyance as he saw the entrance ahead of him disappear, Cao-Cao redirected his troops to the left towards the main, permanent entrance, ignoring the sight of several squads of devils retreating to other entrances further to his right, knowing he would never beat them there.

"Roygun, with us!" Cao-Cao shouted, seeing her fly upwards over one of the buildings scattered around the area. He thought it was a barracks of some kind, but he didn't care. Moments later, he reached the entryway, slaughtering several groups of devils trying to push out of the debris of the gate and from the wall.

Soon, the rest of his heavy hitters were there, although very few of his regular troops had reached him. Four werewolves had stayed together the entire time to watch his back, but the rest were scattered along his route up to this point. Other small groups were pushing through the chaos using the descending Roygun as a rallying point.

“Perseus, Connla, Hercules, we’re heading in, but we’ll wait here for a bit to gather more of our troops. Check your bracelets.” Everyone did, and the majority of them had survived the battle so far. Only Connla’s hadn’t and one of the wizards hastily redid the spell, recreating another shadow bracelet connecting him to the one on Cao-Cao’s wrist.

As the others protected that point, using their various Sacred Gears to grab the attention of their scattered forces, Cao-Cao ventured inside the cave entrance. He moved forward until the entryway was nearly out of sight, the stone of the cave giving way to worked stone and mortar before turning.

There, lying out near the floor, was a golden thread leading back toward the entrance. It works, Cao-Cao thought ecstatically. A large part of him had feared that, in the last, his fortune would turn, and there was some reason or enchantment that would stop the bracelets they had taken from the guard to work. But it looked as if that was not the case. *Now, to see if the other bit of the bracelet’s base enchantment will work.*

With that, he turned back to look the way he had been moving, a single name leaving his lips. “Samael...”

The very air around him seemed to shiver and twitch at that name, yet after a second, the secondary enchantment on the rope bracelet kicked in, tugging his arm forward. *After all, in a maze, you didn’t need to know just where the entrance was but also what you wanted to find inside. The basic-seeming rope bracelet is quite a unique, elegant solution to both those issues,* Cao-Cao exulted.

Returning to his followers, Cao-Cao reported on this score, with Perseus, Connla and Hercules all breathing in sighs of relief. Around them, nearly eighty more of their subordinates had gathered, although no more werewolves or vampires. “the vamps are all scattered around. I think most of them have fallen into a kind of blood fugue,” Connla reported.

“The werewolves have definitely done the same. Still, the wizards and witches seem to have kept together. Even if we leave most of them out here, they should be able to get out with our emergency teleport enchantments.” This was the same kind of item that, more than half a year ago now, Cao-Cao had used to get away from Harry and Yasaka in the forest of Kyoto.

“Fine. We need to move on quickly.” Cao-Cao looked at the werewolves, picking out one of them and addressing him by name, sending him into the prison along with several of the

wizards and witches with Perseus. “Connla, follow after us in two minutes, no longer. Roygun, send up a flare telling the rest of our forces to scatter and get out of here.”

Cao Cao had never wanted to bring his whole force into the actual prison. Keeping the group entering the actual prison a small and controllable force would keep the confusion they would face, even with the shadow bracelets, to a minimum, and he was only after one thing inside the prison complex anyway.

“Mah, mah, I wonder what Bedeze will feel about being left behind?” Roygun snickered. “To say nothing of old Lucifer.”

“Our alliance was to enter the prison. I’m in a position to do so now,” Cao-Cao retorted. “You’re welcome to stay here if you think that is the better option.”

Roygun did not. Even with the mask covering her features and hiding her identity magically, there was still the chance that the still-fighting guards could recognize her. *And then there’s the teeny, tiny fact that I don’t trust Rivezem more than I could throw this mountain.*

While the Khao Brigade forces either began to retreat or raced into the prison, the fight was still going on across the face of the mountain. Even the destruction of the gateway fortress hadn’t stopped that.

Seeing this, Rivezem began to give out orders from where he had yet to move from near the transfer area. ““Creuserey, take five hundred of who you think are good flyers and take over the outer battlements to the right.” Rivezem ordered lazily. “Shalba, do the same on the left. Euclid, with me. We’ll go up the middle into the dust and mire my attack left. Remember, we need to kill as many of these guards as possible, lest we fight them in the prison itself.”

Creuserey instantly nodded, and shouted a few other names, who in turn grabbed others, and soon more than a thousand flyers were in the air, heading off in both directions. They would find few defenders remaining on the wall, though, as the defenders had begun to retreat even before Rivezem had destroyed the central gateway thanks to Cao-Cao’s flanking attack. Meanwhile, Euclid began to freeze the world around him as he moved forward with his own force ahead of Rivezem, determined to remove as many obstacles as his master as he could.

“What about the rest of us? Surely you’re not going to make me wait here in reserve with you? For one such as I, that is a paltry position!” Bedeze said, scoffing, then he frowned. “And I thought you would be as eager as Cao-Cao is to get our fellows out of prison. Isn’t there a chance that the two of you are trying to recruit the same people?”

“Very little chance, in point of fact. I don’t even care what he’s after. I am after everyone and everything within, while he wants a single item. If we come into conflict later, then I will just

take whatever he is here for from Cao-Cao's corpse," Rivezem announced, giving the youth the party line that he'd fed the rest of the Old Satan Faction. It was a lie but a believable one, given that there were numerous powerful prisoners within Cocytus. *No, I am after only one being, if she can still be called that, within. Only one.*

"And as for when you and I will charge in, Bedeze, that rather has to do with what might be happening over there." Rivezem pointed to the other side of where Bedeze was standing to his left, to an area of the prison's frontage that had yet to be attacked.

Bedeze, to Rivezem's mild astonishment, actually turned his head and looked. "I don't..."

That was all the opening Rivezem needed. Condensed magic of equal power to the blast he had unleashed on the outer gate of the prison appeared in his hand, and he stabbed it directly into the back of Bedeze's neck. The younger devil's magical resistance flared and faded in an eyeblink, and before he could do more than widen his eyes and try to turn his neck, the blow severed his spine, blowing out the front of his neck instantly. The foolish younger devil was dead before even the first droplet of blood hit the ground, although he spasmed and continued to kick and twitch on the ground. For a few moments, the body remained there, then began to fade, turning into ash and dust, revealing the red King Piece that the youth had been so eager to show off earlier.

Rivezem picked it up instantly, then grinned as the item's enchantment began to tug and pull at his very being, drawing out further magical power. He could feel it. He could feel it! *Yes, yes, I thought I had reached the edge of my powers, become so strong I could not become stronger still. Now I know that for the lie it was!* With that, he strode forward, gesturing around him at his fellow devils, not one of whom had balked at the sudden death of one of their own. "Come."

With this, with this new power and the mother in hand, I will have everything I need. Everything I need to remake our race in the image of myself, to banish the weakness that has pervaded us since my father died! We will become as we were always destined to be, destroyers, despoilers, killers. Everything will become nothing, and goodness itself will die! Rivezem exulted internally as he strode forward.

OOOOOO

As the assault on Cocytus began, Harry and his ladies were asleep in Kuoh. It was deep into the night, a night, moreover, that had been mainly filled with lovemaking. This was why Harry was half-nestled into Rias's chest, with the rest of his body beside her and one arm stuck out to his other side where Akeno cuddled it like a small plushy. To Akeno's other side,

Yubelluna lay, while Yasaka nestled into Rias's other side from Harry. The only one missing was Kala, who had opted to not come back through from Danan for the past several days, opting to work with the dwarves on building more golems.

While Akeno and Yubelluna were unwilling to experiment overmuch with women, they weren't turned off by Rias and Yasaka having some fun times to one side while they concentrated on Harry. Even though, in Yubelluna's case, she still wasn't fully willing to go all the way with Harry either. Her past with Rizer still haunted his bandrui, although Harry had noted Yubelluna seemed to greatly enjoy being around the others while they enjoyed their own 'wife time' as Yasaka had put it to Kunou, with him. It was as if seeing the contrast of how Harry's ladies acted around him in comparison to how Rizer's peerage had been was dispelling ever more of Yubelluna's nightmares.

Thus, much like every night, it had been a very good time, yet precisely how many hours Harry had gotten of actual sleep was a question when he, Rias, and Akeno, all of whom had served as anchors for the wards, felt something come through from the Underworld unscheduled. Even as all three of them began to stir a bit at the feeling, they didn't move much because all of them knew that Sona or someone she assigned would be on duty in the ORC clubroom. Given the ambush Sirzechs, Harry and Ajuka planned, it just made sense to have someone on standby in the clubroom at all times. Kiba and Akeno had been on duty there after school earlier, but at night, it was normally one of Sona's peerage. If it was an emergency, one of them would be able to call Harry or one of the others on their cell phones.

However, not five minutes later, just as Rias and Akeno were prepared to fall back to sleep, Harry's phone went off. This started a round of grumbling, and Harry, who had been thinking idly of taking advantage of how close his mouth was to Rias's nipple, slowly pulled himself off of Rias, rolling to one side towards the noise.

Akeno, smirking slightly, continued to feign sleep, making Harry basically crawl over her to grab the phone. When he was above her, Akeno reached up and pulled Harry's head down into her chest. The full implications of what might be waking them up hadn't hit any of them yet, and with a faint smile, Harry allowed himself to rest between her glorious mammaries for a second even as he reached over Yube for his cell phone. This process was made much easier since, for some reason, Yube had somehow wandered downwards from where she had been sleeping with her head on a pillow like a normal person. Now, she was using a significant portion of the blanket as a body pillow instead.

Harry watched as she groaned, stretched and then rolled to one side before realizing how close she was to the edge. Just as he grabbed the cell phone, Yube thumped to the ground

with a yelp, which finally started the process of waking up Yasaka, who let loose a little yip as she pushed herself away from Rias, blinking.

Clicking his phone open, Harry set it between his cheek and his shoulder before smirking slightly into the now-awake Akeno's violet eyes, allowing his head to fall forward into her chest again, complete with the cell phone. Her squeal of mixed amusement and shock at the coldness of the cell phone had Harry smiling, even as he spoke into the pickup. "This is Harry."

"Harry, a messenger from Maou Lucifer came through. The attack on Cocytus has begun, and it's a big one."

That sobered Harry right up, fully dispelling the last vestiges of the fugue of happiness being surrounded by his ladies always gave him, especially after a night spent in the manner they had spent it. He pushed away from Akeno, shaking his head at her when she made to thread her fingers into his hair and was off the bed in seconds. "Give us twenty minutes, and my team will be there."

He looked over at Rias, who had stiffened the moment that Harry had shifted away from Akeno, pushing herself upright and shaking Yasaka. "Akeno, Yasaka, get ready. Akeno, go wake up Mittelt. I'll be popping in to grab the golems and Kala after we get everyone else assembled in the ORC room. After all," Harry chuckled whimsically. "There isn't exactly enough room in the ORC clubhouse for more than two or three golems at a time. And since we're bringing in all of them..." He shrugged. "I'm going to be on ferry duty for a while."

Yasaka followed Akeno towards the latter, leading downwards. The kitsune desired coffee more than her own clothing at the moment, something Harry noticed with some amusement, fighting back an urge to swat her on the rear as she went. Yubelluna, in contrast, was already gathering up her clothing, not being so good about transfiguring her clothing as the bustiest of Harry's lovers, who had simply grabbed the bedsheet from the bed and transfigured it into a robe.

He looked over at Rias, who had slowly pushed herself off of the bed as well. Like Yasaka, she didn't bother dressing, simply standing there, watching Harry and the rest, a worried, but confident look on her face. "Watch Lily and the rest for us?"

"Always. And you had **all** better return in one piece Harry Potter, let alone the alternative. I am not going to tell Lily or Kunou why you or Yasaka aren't coming home again. We've got too much to live for and too many problems to solve to let you die now, love," Rias answered, leaning up and giving him a deep kiss on the lips.

Soon, Harry's team was assembled in the occult research clubroom, where they found a very wide-awake Sona, the kind of wide-awake that told of someone who had recently imbibed

in a Pepper Up potion. Not that she was alone in that. Indeed, the forty Hit Wizards and four teams of Onmyouji, with their distinctive carpets in hand gathered throughout the building, all looked like they had dealt with the lateness of the hour in the same manner.

Sona nodded to Harry and briskly explained that Sirzechs, Grayfia, Ajuka, Souji and Typhon would be waiting for them down in the underworld in the Gremory mansion. Sirzechs had already set up an emergency teleport to the command hub of the prison complex and would be taking the ones who would be heading into the prison itself there. "He's also begun to set up another one higher up the mountain. Apparently, Ajuka-sama also already set up a warded area to hide your arrival from the battle going on below."

Harry nodded and gestured for Akeno to take charge of the rest of the group, whereupon she quickly split them into two teams. Akeno, along with Mittelt and the wizards, would head in now to the new rally point. They and the absent Kala and the golems would be attacking the main force that had assaulted the prison from behind. The rest, Kiba, Koneko, Harry, Cu, Loup and Tonks, would be heading into the prison complex itself with Harry to handle anyone who it already gotten into the prison.

"Do we know the makeup of our enemy?" Harry asked, even as he moved over to touch the fal stone in preparation for transferring to Danan, specifically, Tir Na Nog, where the golems, bar a team of five in Egypt, were gathered. Since the dwarves, who'd had nothing to do with the think tank, had continued to create some of them following the latest pattern they'd designed with Kala and Akeno's help, there were now enough of the golems to fill a battalion.

"The reports that Maou Lucifer passed on to me said that there were thousands of devils, and at least two hundred werewolves reported, possibly more. It looks as if the Old Satan Faction and Cao-Cao's group, he's been reported there for certain, have somehow joined forces. We knew from interrogating Bikou that there was an Old Satan power bloc in the Khaos Brigade, but there were far more devils involved in this attack than the Maous believed there to be."

Harry frowned at that but eventually shrugged his shoulders. "If that's who we caught, that's who we caught. Although I would dearly like to know how the heck those two are working together. I'd have thought Cao-Cao would be philosophically unable to work with nonhumans."

"Lord Lucifer said, and this is a quote, 'so would he'," Sona stated, holding up her fingers in quotes with all the enthusiasm of an elderly lady picking up her dog's poo. "Apparently, they only knew that two particular devils might be joining Cao-Cao and his portion of the Khaos Brigade, yet the inclusion of the Old Satan Faction was a surprise, as is apparently some of the people who have already been seen and recognized by the defenders."

Sona held up a hand forestalling Harry's question, feeling a little bit of amusement at knowing Harry well enough to guess what he was going to say before he could say it. "The

defenders retreated into the maze and were able to mostly break contact. Hundreds still died, even though most of them had been ready for a combat drill of some kind, thanks to Lord Lucifer informing the warden what might happen. That was the only warning he was willing to allow them to have, though. Concerned that there might be people on the inside already who could warn our enemies.”

“I understand that kind of thinking, although as someone who has been on the other side of that need-to-know decision, I can tell you it isn’t pleasant. Still, I won’t argue.” *Sometimes, sacrifice really is necessary.* Harry turned away as the fal stone under his hand lit up, nodding to Sona and Akeno. “I’ll be back.”

Porting through to Danan took but a moment, although when the first batch of golems came through to the Underworld, Akeno was surprised to find that Harry had returned with not just three golems and Kala but also their friend Luna. She cocked her head thoughtfully to one side while Grayfia, waiting beside her husband to go into action, looking far more tense and disturbed than she would normally allow herself to appear, stared in surprise. “I believe that this is Luna Lovegood, correct? Might I ask what she is doing here? I thought she was a noncombatant like the Granger-Patils.”

Harry held up his hands and turned away, already teleporting back through the dimensional tunnel to Earth and then from there to Danan, leaving Luna to answer that question.

“Being the queen of the Fae’s quite a lot of fun most of the time. But then, there are other times when I really, really want to hurt someone. Specifically, I wish to pull fairy wings off, burn swanhilde feathers, and tie dwarven beards into knots at the moment. Because I can’t do all those things, I’m here to instead hurt some other people. A lot.”

Since this is all said in an almost singsong kind of tone, Grayfia stared at the young woman as if she was now questioning Luna’s sanity. But none of the others said anything, and she fell silent.

Chuckling and secretly sympathizing with Luna a good deal, Sirzechs began to transport those who would be stationed within the prison itself into the command center, while his father did the same with the first of the golems. It was time to close the trap.

OOOOOOO

While Ajuka had created an area high up the mountainside that was hidden from those below, there actually already resided a place further up the mountain that was even more hidden. Indeed, it was hidden behind every ward that devil, modern wizard, ancient Egyptian,

Incan, and African spell that its current owners could devise. The wizard-style Fidelius being but one of several such. Neither any kind of scientific method nor magic would ever find this house.

This was the home of Maou Leviathan, touted as the most cerebral of the first four Maou but also the weakest to have ever held that office. On the one hand, he was credited with creating Cocytus, both its first addition as a fortress and prison and then helping to change it entirely over into a prison complex with the help of an unknown human. On the other hand, he was known to have had relations with humans like that and had been the first of the original Maou to die in the war with Heaven. Because of that, his descendants had all moved away, taking up mansions elsewhere in the underworld, wanting nothing to do with his first home. Even as they claimed credit for his library and other creations.

It was remarkably shortsighted of them, Akhenaten thought, staring down from where he sat on the sofa into a scrying pool that showed him everything going on well, well below his current position. After all, the first Maou to understand that knowledge is power would very obviously have some secrets, something that his descendants didn't even think of beyond ransacking his library. And even then, they didn't do a good job of it. The fools. Only Katerea has worked at all to offset that, and her own pride won't let her work with the Sitri Clan to do more. Not that I do not understand that, at least.

He watched as the battle began, watched as Cao-Cao swung wide of the main defenses, then slammed back into the curtain wall, destroying a tower there and leading his forces in. He continued to watch as the fortress over the main gate was destroyed by Rivezem, quite enjoying the view. Through the scrying pool, it was as if the whole conflict had been laid out for him alone.

Yes, watching a battle like this from on high is a good prelude for when we ascend to our rightful position as gods. Not gods like in the old pantheons, not even Ra and the others. We will become singular beings, ruling over all like Yahweh might have eventually if he had not given his power to seal 666. With Samael, we can take power from Ophis and all the other dragons, then break every other magical faction out there, and rule the Earth as we were meant to, as we were destined to from ancient times!

Akhenaten did not look up at the distant chiming of a small bell, a very physical thing that they had installed over the mansion's front door. Only one other person alive would be able to even find this place, let alone step inside due to the blood wards. The same individual who had helped in that process, the same woman who had captured his heart ages ago. Even if someone had forced Nefertiti to give up the secret of this mansion, they wouldn't have been able to enter.

When the door to the sitting room opened, Akhenaten stood up, bowing to his wife as propriety demanded, before his eyes widened slightly, and he hurried forward, his earlier enjoyment of the show being put on below fading for the moment at the sight of his wife's injuries. "I take it that the days leading up to today's events were not pleasant for Rivezem's servants?"

"You would assume right," Nefertiti said, stumbling forward. Her left leg was badly burned in several places, her face was heavily bruised, and her right shoulder looked as if it didn't work properly, while a few of Nefertiti's fingers on that hand looked as if they'd been mangled, while her entire body was twitching as if she had been tortured by electricity. "I was this," Nefertiti hissed, holding up two unbruised fingers even as her husband reached her, light green energy coming from his hands, "this close to transforming and getting out of there several times, but luckily, my Nekoshu-style deception spells were able to convince him to not try to pull me into his bedroom or finish me off."

Her words ended in a low moan of relief as the pain began to fade, and she smiled tenderly at her husband. "You were always better at healing spells than I, my Pharoah."

"And you are always better at espionage and infiltration. We each have have own strengths," Akhenaten said, stepping back after a few moments as he finished healing her. Nefertiti then shifted from her guise as a maid into her normal body, causing Akhenaten to chuckle a bit at seeing his very Egyptian wife wearing a French maid outfit, along with the Nekoshu tail lifting up her skirt. That tail and some other enhancements Nefertiti had gone through since draining Kuroka of everything that made her unique drew the Pharoah's eye, and not for the first time.

But he shook himself and turned away, heading towards the sofa again. There would be time enough for that kind of thing, indeed, all eternity, when they had finally claimed the power and positions that were their due. "Come, Nefertiti. Let us watch the play we have set in motion. It will go on for quite a while before we have to move."

His words were a little bit more hyperbole than would otherwise normally be the case, but Nefertiti agreed quickly. They hadn't really set Cao-Cao or Rivezem in motion. Both of them were interested in breaking into Cocytus for their own reasons. But it was true that the pair of them had controlled the flow of information to a certain degree, and Nefertiti had helped the enchanters finally figure out a way to at least link shadow bracelets to the real rope bracelet that would enable them to traverse the prison. The alliance between them was simply something the pair had taken advantage of, and timing had always been in the hands of Rivezem and Cao-Cao.

Mind you, my husband and I won't need that little trick. What we needed was a distraction, and we are getting it in spades, Nefertiti thought as she settled into the sofa beside Akhenaten.

OOOOOOO

Deep within the prison at the head of the attacking force, Cao-Cao and the rest of the Hero bloc had not been having fun because while the overarching trap had yet to close its jaws, ironically, Rivezem's thoughts on this score were actually accurate. The Hero Bloc had indeed sprung many of the traps and pitfalls that Rivezem and his group would otherwise have run into. The pitfalls and physical traps were easy to deal with. The magical traps were not.

In the lead of the small group, Perseus paused at a fork in the hall, looking in either direction, his eyes narrowing suspiciously. "Is it just me, or are we running into more of these? Check your bracelets, especially you, Lord Cao-Cao."

"I have told you that you don't need to call me a lord, Perseus. We are all descendants of heroes, and thus equal," Cao-Cao replied, yet seeing no point in not doing so, Cao-Cao held up his bracelet, followed by the others. When they did, the real one Cao-Cao was wearing and the shadow bracelets all appeared as they had looked since they'd entered the prison. The gray smoke-like strings connected the shadow bracelets to the real one, which in turn emitted a small, thin golden stream leading the way back they had come from, visible only to Cao-Cao, who reported this to the others.

"It still seems to be functioning. But Perseus is right. This is a new magic that we haven't had time to truly experiment with. Everyone needs to keep within my eyesight or behind me. At every turn, we need to stop and move forward around the turn as a group," Cao-Cao ordered. "If these fail, we cannot be found out of position and split up by the magic of this place."

"Ara, we're a little too large a group for that," Roygun quipped, shaking her head. "We should never have brought in your little servants."

While the rest of the group of Khaos Brigade members flinched at that, the four werewolves growled, their fur rising as they barred their fangs at the horned woman. Yet the foursome made no motion to do more. All of them, even more than the wizards, witches and magicians, understood the balance of power here, and Roygun's smile their way confirmed that she had been trying to get a rise out of the ugly little creatures. They were the exact opposite of cute, in her opinion.

"Perhaps, but what is done is done. So long as our route forward remains, we will continue to move on." Since the rope bracelet around his wrist was still pulling him forward,

Cao-Cao said no more and motioned Perseus to continue along that route. However, between one second and the next, things changed.

Perseus felt something like a buzz going through his foot and looked down only to see a gleaming rune had appeared beneath his foot. Instantly, he twisted around, shouting, "Wait!" causing the others behind him to leap backward, putting more than a yard between them and his position at the head of the force.

Then, there were tentacles.

The rune under his foot exploded, and the ground beneath him turned soft and gooey, the walls likewise, as if they had become some horrific amalgamation of living creature and normal wall. Guided by hundreds of wide, unblinking eyes, tentacles resembling that of octopuses, tentacle monsters from Japanese hentai and squids reached out for Perseus from nearly as far as his eye could see from both sides, above and below.

"Ack, what in the heck!?" He squawked, ducking under the first few to reach for him before being caught by still more.

"Oh, hell no. I might not be into hentai, but tentacle porn is faaar too popular among demons for me to like where this is going!" Roygun nearly shrieked, losing her normal poise and airy nature, backing away rapidly, forgetting the fact she could have destroyed any of the tentacles coming their way with her magic.

Nor was she alone in this. Indeed, the entire group backed away rapidly, staring in shock and more than a little bit of horror at the writhing, slimy, and altogether disturbing tapestry the hallway had become, with the women being even more fearful than the men. Even the sole werewolf bitch pushed her fellows between them and the writhing mass ahead of the group.

Only Cao-Cao and Connla didn't instantly retreat, instead beginning to cut apart or spear any tentacle that reached them. With Perseus in the way, Cao-Cao couldn't just use the True Longinus to simply sweep the hallway clean of obstacles so concentrated on protecting Connla. The Descendent of Cú Cuchulain began to use his more subtle Shadow Manipulation magic to deal with an ever-widening area of the tentacles, slowly advancing towards their more distant friend.

Thankfully for both the man in question and the people behind him, Perseus was also able to deal with this.

Even as two tentacles wrapped around his legs and tried to pull them upward and apart, Perseus reached behind him, grabbing at his shield and pulling it in front of him. Another tentacle grabbed Perseus by the waist, and a second grabbed him by his sword arm, but his shield was already on his forearm, and Perseus shouted, "Gorgon's Gaze!"

The tentacle monsters that had suddenly grown from the walls, ceiling and floor all froze. The eyes sticking out from the various surfaces turned to stone first, the magic of that attack spreading out from Perseus filling the entire hallway in front of him as far as he could see. All of the shield's powers were linked to Perseus's own line of sight.

After his attack faded, Perseus found himself stuck against the wall, held there by a series of differently sized stone tentacles. Thankfully, the stone tentacles around his legs, although holding him in a **very** painful position (a man's legs should not be able to be pulled in that direction), also gave him enough leverage to pull his arm out of the grip holding it, shattering the stone. With his free arm, Perseus reached down and smashed apart the other tentacles, freeing him to drop to the ground.

Looking at Cao-Cao and the others, he growled, "You guys could've helped instead of just defending yourselves."

"We were," Cao-Cao and Connla drawled. "We would have reached you eventually. It's just your solution was much faster than mine," Connla admitted.

"I am in no way going to get into a fight with tentacles if I can help it," Roygun stated firmly, to which the other women in the party, two of the magicians, three witches and the lone werewolf, nodded firmly. "I may be a devil, but even I have limits."

Hercules snorted, tapping several of the stone tentacles and exploding them with his explosion magic, the effect rolling down the hallway and out of sight beyond the long reach of Perseus's earlier attack. That this left a lot of rubble and debris didn't matter to him much, although he was smart enough to realize this was a very different kind of trap than the ones they had seen before this. "Was that part of the defenses of this place, or..."

"It could've been a trap set by one of the guards, maybe," Connla murmured. "I don't know, I've never studied runes like that."

"I think it probably was," Roygun admitted. "There are far more devils of both genders who think that kind of thing would be hilarious than not. An Ankhsera-based trap with tentacles like that, I can see a lot of people playing with that kind of thing."

"Regardless of its source or the reasoning behind it, we need to be cautious. Two of the wizards should take position forward with Perseus. All of you, use Mage Sight or whatever you can to make certain we spot traps like this before actually walking into them," Cao-Cao ordered.

"He's right. Watch where you touch, too. I doubt we'll be lucky enough that whoever is playing with wards is foolish enough to forget that he's got more than the floor to play with," Perseus ordered, tapping the edge of his shield against his forehead for a moment. The Gorgon's gaze didn't just allow him to use a Gorgon's full power, it also gave him other eye-related

magical abilities, something he had discovered through painstaking practice. He stared ahead of them, taking in the wild magic ahead of him, the magic that was built into everything here, and shuddered, tapping his forehead again quickly, trying to narrow it down to just magic that was different from the overarching matrix of this place.

Around him, all of the wizards and magicians also shivered at that. One had tried that when first entering Cocytus, only to go nearly blind at the amount of background magic that hit their senses when they did. Yet they still obeyed, only to discover it didn't help. There was so much background magic that none of them could parse through it for anything that didn't belong. They were left with needing to watch for more physical warnings.

For more than an hour, the group was able to spot the magic-based traps, springing them or avoiding them. But their luck could not last forever.

The next spell-type trap the group ran into was something that Harry had come up with. Taking a spell that Mittelt had discovered in the Black Library and enjoyed using, Harry had turned it into a runic trap.

The Hero Bloc missed it, staring ahead of them into a larger, wider set of corridors, the one they were in widening and growing far taller at the same time. Cao-Cao ordered Hercules and the others forward, watching intently, but before they could enter the larger area, one of the wizards using Magic Sight brushed the wall where Harry's trap had been hidden. Within a second, he and several others found their clothing suddenly attacking them, turning into spikes and stabbing inward between one step and the next.

Connla gasped, but his Shadow Magic let him create a skintight suit of armor under his clothing, and the spikes weren't able to get through. The neckline tightening around his neck was more dangerous, but he quickly tore his neckline with a spike of shadow and stumbled back, gasping as he tried to think up some kind of counterspell, the spikes still trying to drive into his skin.

Around him, however, the wizards and magicians caught in the trap were not so lucky. Men fell screaming and thrashing in agony, but none of the others had healing magic quick enough to help. Even as two of the other wizards rushed to their friend's sides, all five of the others caught in the trap were already dead.

Perseus scowled, moving forward and closing the closest man's eyes. "Fuck, that is one bad way to go—Hercules?"

He blinked as Hercules kicked the body down the hall ahead of him. So strong was the kick that the man's dead body bounced several dozen times before heading out into the wider area beyond. "What the fuck, Hercules!?"

“Fucking move, Perseus,” Hercules growled. “And look, it worked.” Ahead of them, the body had triggered not just a few rune-based traps but a dead drop that crushed the body when it bounced back from the far corner. “Move away, I’ll use the other’s bodies the same way. We need to push on quickly.”

Nodding, the werewolves and Roygun did the same, moving forward with Hercules. Moments later, they were in the more open area, climbing up around and over the blood-soaked debris left behind by several physical traps that the dead bodies of their fellows had tripped.

“We are under a time limit,” Cao-Cao stated succinctly, shaking his head and patting Perseus on the shoulder while around him, the surviving wizards, witches and the few magicians with them all stared at where their companion’s bodies had just been turned into paste in various ways. “One kind of trap, I could see the guards creating along with the physical traps. Several different **rune-based** traps? No. I think we’ve run into an ambush, but...”

Cao-Cao held up the bracelet, only to pause, his previous confidence disappearing in an instant as the image of the golden rope leading backward along their route started to fade. He could still feel the tug forward, but the way out disappeared as he watched. “No, impossible!”

Ahead of him, Hercules quickly turned at Cao-Cao’s shout, taking a slight step sideways to let two of the werewolves pass him. This put him in another trap, one that Cú had created for this ambush and which hadn’t been sprung moments before.

It also put the werewolf that had passed him out of position to have a direct line of sight to any of the others.

Instantly, the werewolf in question found himself elsewhere. “WH, what the fuck?” he growled, staring around him at an area far smaller and more primitive looking than the large hallway had been before.

Scowling and seeing no way to just remain where he was and hope his fellows would find him, the werewolf moved on, trusting in his werewolf endurance and regeneration to save him. And it did for the first few traps he ran into. Then, the werewolf saw what looked like a jail cell ahead of him.

Loping forward, the werewolf made for the door, only to eat a faceful of silver needles made by the devil behind that door. He fell, screaming, only for another silver needle to penetrate his brain, killing him instantly.

By that point, bad things had already happened to his fellows.

Harry's trap caught Hercules just as the magic of Cocytus began to truly take hold of them all. As more than half their force behind the group panicked and ran back around the corner only to disappear, Hercules groaned and began to retch, falling to his knees, then slumped down onto his side into the puddle of waste that he had made even as more began to pour out of him, a low keening wail agony coming from the man between wretches.

"Wh, what the hell..." Cao-Cao whispered, staring at the man and then at his rope bracelet. For once, his vaunted mind, his tactical acumen and his ability to roll with the punches had completely disserved Cao-Cao as the true horror of their predicament burst in his brain like a bomb going off. "We... this is all... they were prepared for us. We're trapped..."

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"What exactly did you do to that man?" Harry asked, looking over at Cú and indicating the sight of Hercules' small, pathetic form on the screen.

Currently, Harry and his group were in the central control room of the prison. This was the only room within the prison that couldn't move. Because Cocytus was not just a physical prison but an honest-to-goodness ever-shifting maze. One that no one, no matter what kind of magic they had, could find their way through without, as Cao-Cao and Rivezem had learned, the rope bracelets.

The whole prison was based largely on the idea of the old Minotaur's Maze mythology from ancient Greece. In that legend, the king of the island of Crete had gone back on a deal with the god of the oceans, Poseidon. In retaliation the god of the sea cast a spell on the queen that had her fall in love with the very animal he had vowed to sacrifice to Poseidon in order to win his favor, a giant white bull. His wife had then given birth to Asterios, the Minotaur. Eventually, the Minotaur had proven himself a monster, eating human flesh. At that point, on the words of an oracle, the king had built and imprisoned the Minotaur in a maze underneath his palace.

Only Cocytus had taken that idea to an entirely different level. Instead of making it simply a physical maze, they added magic and everything it could achieve into the mix. And they did so to a level that no one alive today, except perhaps Harry's think tank in Danan, could match.

The devil equivalent of Point Me spells, navigation spells, spells to retrace your steps, scent, a didactic memory, anything and everything that would allow you to find your way from Point A to Point B without interruption **did not work** inside Cocytus unless you had the key: the rope bracelets tied to the central ball of rope, several stories tall, that dominated the command center at the center of the prison.

What no one but the individual who had created the prison and the guards who worked there knew was to get to a specific jail cell, the bracelets needed to be **continually** enchanted at the locus, the center of the maze, where the ball of yarn was kept. Every day, the bracelet's wearer needed to come and reenergize the magic linking the rope bracelet to the larger ball of rope.

That secret, above all others, had never passed the lips of any who worked there. Indeed, it could not because the moment any of them tried to say it, their brains would literally explode in their heads. To work in Cocytus, you had to volunteer to have magic tattoos placed on you, not least of which was a small runic array placed on their brain.

The control room was circular, with the ball of rope sunk into the middle of the room, making the rest of the room act almost like a ring around it. Despite its size, the rope ball looked almost nondescript, especially in comparison to the rows of magically crafted sensor panels, the all-around high-tech feel of the prison's command center otherwise. Yet when you looked at it, the more you did, the more a person became drawn into its complexity, until you couldn't figure out where the string began or ended, until every twist and turn of the rope seemed to fascinate to the point of obsession.

Many of the people that Harry had brought to help in this ambush had trouble pulling their minds away from the thing. Yasaka had shivered, blinked, then resolutely turned away and made a point of looking at all of the screens around them. Kiba had stared until someone else had brought him back to reality by shaking his shoulder. Tonks had nearly lost control of her metamorphic powers as she stared at it, and Koneko had taken one look at the thing and turned away rapidly, and had not moved from where she was staring at the wall since her tail thrashing behind her.

The room was lined with dozens of small stations. Each of them contained a chair and a magic ball, which was linked to a different section or level of the prison, letting the person sitting at them see what was going on there through hundreds of tiny crystal balls that acted like video cameras would in the human world.

To these small stations tiny blue glass balls had been added recently. Each of them was tied to the sensor wards Cú and Harry had put down in various areas throughout the maze. They didn't have the same level of saturation as the original camera-like observation crystals, but they at least were on every level of the prison from top to bottom.

"You really want to know?" Cú asked, wagging his eyebrows. "It came to me after talkin' with Issei of all people. That brat has some very interesting and warped ideas."

Remembering some of the magical spells that Isaac, as Rias's Bishop, had created, Harry paused before saying, "You know what? Against my better judgment, I probably should know."

“I call it the Eternal Hangover curse.”

“THE FUCK?” Came from practically every adult there, even some of the sensor operators turning to stare at Cú guffawed. “I mean, when I was younger, I had to deal with them all the time, and I still do occasionally. Think of it as the worst kind of hangover that will go on and on forever. And better, it’s linked to Mr. Explodo-touch now, not just the ground he walked on. He’ll keep on feeling that way until he literally hurls himself to death, or I remove it.”

“That is pure evil,” Sirzechs breathed. “Even the old Lucifer wouldn’t have stooped so low.”

His tone was admiring, though, and Harry chuckled dryly. “Well, I think we can consider that Hercules at least has been completely sidelined.”

On the screen, they were currently watching, Cao-Cao, despite his momentary dejection, recovered quickly. From the screens, the group in the command center watched as he pulled them together, rotating who was in the front and behind while everyone kept in sight of one another. The group bunched up in a somewhat funny manner, going around corners, but it seemed to work at first until they ran into more physical-style traps as well as a few more runic traps from Harry. Simple ones they froze in place or caused explosions of concussive force centered on whoever walked over them. This killed several of the group, and cut off the line of sight to the rest of the band that was necessary for them to stay together in the face of the maze’s magic.

At the same time, groups of the prison guards who had retreated into the prison were able to attack them, while throughout Cocytus, the last aspect of this trap closed shut.

Harry shook his head as he watched the true magic of Cocytus begin to take effect. “You know, I would dearly like to know who designed this place. I mean, it’s kind of terrifying how effective they made the strange displacement magic of this dimension.”

On the screen, Cao-Cao used the True Longinus to slam a blow into a wall, shattering the wall and moving on, heading ever deeper, his knotted bracelet tugging him forward. A moment later, after Cao-Cao and his group had passed through, the wall rebuilt itself, leftover magical energies shimmering in the bits of the shattered wall for a moment before it pulled itself together.

“Yep, would dearly like to know who built this place,” Harry murmured wistfully. “And I thought MACUSA’s magical engineers were good.”

“So would we... want to know who made this place, I mean. All we know is that whoever built it initially was a human, one that the original Maou Leviathan made a pact with and a

genius. Many think he was Daedalus the Grecian engineer, but no one knows for certain. The Leviathan Library was the subject of many conflicts among his descendants, and it's estimated only one out of every three books remain, including any records of past deals he made," Lucifer said ruefully, not turning his head away from the screen he was currently looking at.

"Worse, we devils were always big on secrets and only really developed bureaucracy into the truly soul-draining form it can be today after watching humanity for several hundred years. So notetaking back then wasn't exactly the best," Ajuka added.

Neither Maou turned away from another screen. This showed another level of the prison, where Rivezem Lucifer, who, Harry understood, was some kind of high ranking criminal long thought dead. His eyes and that of Ajuka were both staring there, waiting.

The Warden turned to one officer stationed next to what looked like a large, almost Acme-large switch. "Do it."

That man nodded and, with two others helping him, flipped the giant switch. The single large diamond above the overly large switch, which had been white and bland looking, began to glow.

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"Look!" Nefertiti hissed, pointing. They'd been watching the cleanup going on outside, with several small groups of the devils who had previously been guarding the prison being winkled out of position and slaughtered.

In the Scrying pool, the harsh white light of the transfer point linking one level of the Underworld to the others was beginning to flicker, and soon, it went off entirely.

Quickly, Ahkenaten turned the direction of the scrying pool straight up above the small mansion. Above, the view that should have shimmered with the sight of rapidly moving air and even clouds now showed nothing but a purple haze. "Sirzechs and the rest did it," Akhenaten murmured, shivering.

The final sanction of the prison was active. Now it was only a matter of moments before Cocytus was isolated from the rest of the Underworld and, through it, Earth.

The reason why Nefertiti and himself had needed to set all this into motion was simple: they needed scapegoats. The pair of them had known for millennia that there was a way into the prison that was not just unguarded but entirely unknown to the current owners. Essentially, the original architect and Maou Leviathan had needed what amounted to a maintenance shaft into the prison as they were building it. And ever since, that maintenance shaft had existed,

connecting every level of the prison to the house Nefertiti and Akhenaten were currently hiding in.

There were problems. One, neither of them knew what kind of movement sensors or so forth the prison had. Second, the final defense of Cocytus had nothing to do with its inner workings. Rather, it was the fact this, like the other levels of the Underworld, could be cut off entirely from its fellows, becoming a tiny pocket dimension all on its own.

It could not survive thus for very long. Barely half a day at that, before it all started to come apart and the air started to run out. But it would be enough to stop any attempt to leave this level of the Underworld, no matter what kind of teleportation spell you used. Including those the married couple had access to. They could literally not reach far enough to find an anchor on the other side.

Thus, while Akhenaten and Nefertiti could get in, they weren't certain that they could get back out with their prize. Of All the jails, the one they were most interested in was the most likely to have sensors inside that would warn of their target leaving. So there needed to be a diversion going on, a big one, in order to divert attention from their theft, and let them get back out. Once back out of the prison, they would be able to hide in the mansion until the defenders were forced to reconnect Cocytus to the rest of the Underworld. At that point, they could escape, regardless of their theft having been discovered.

"Come, wife. It is time for us to act now," Akhenaten said, reaching out a hand to help Nefertiti to her feet. Soon, the pair were in the basement of the mansion, where a square shaft with a gate over it sat. It took the pair but a moment to open it, then they were heading down, delirious with joy. So far, everything was going as they had predicted.

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Others... not so much. The first to become aware of this, the final trap set up by Sirzechs and Ajuka, were those outside the actual prison complex.

"Euclid!"

Euclid turned from where he had been working on creating a several-meter-thick wall of ice to guard the entryway out into the teleportation grid beyond, a frown on his face. "What has disturbed you so much you would shout my name in so vulgar a..."

Euclid's question faded as he stared at the large crystal that the magician was holding up. A crystal the size of a large bowling ball it should've been gleaming with yellow-white energy, ready to teleport them out if Sirzechs or someone else powerful enough to make Euclid run away showed up. Yet it was not. The crystal was practically dead, a normal glass orb.

Turning quickly, Euclid pushed himself off the ground, his wings appearing from his shoulders and powering him upwards further until he could stare over both the original wall and the ice wall he had created. Out in the plains beyond, where the scintillating energy of the dimensional pathway connecting Cocytus to the other levels of hell should have existed, there was nothing. Simply gray nothingness as far as the eye could see where the dimension of Cocytus ended, completely cut off from the rest of the Underworld. “No, no! Master, we have been betrayed!”

High above the prison complex, every golem that had so far been created, Grayfia, Akeno, Mittelt, and Kala waited along with small teams of magicians of their own, along with two-hit wizard squads, all of whom had been authorized to use the three Unforgivables during this battle. There was also Luna, whose inclusion still made Grayfia twitch a bit as she looked at the cheerful young woman. But since Akeno and the others who knew Luna hadn’t objected to her being part of this battle, Grayfia hadn’t said anything.

Now, staring between the various spells that were hiding them from the site of the devils magicians and so forth below, Grayfia Gremory-Lucifuge, the strongest Queen in the Underworld, turned to the others. “My brother is mine. Akeno, you are an overall command of the aerial assault. Golems go in first, draw the attention of the foot soldiers on the other side. Then hit them from above.”

With that, she turned away and marched out of the hiding place, a slide of ice appearing in front of her with barely even a flick of a finger. Despite her new scars on her face, leg and lack of a wing, Grayfia’s magic had not faded whatsoever, and she was eager to talk to her brother. *I thought he was dead. I thought Rivezem was dead. Now here he is serving that, that madman still? No. I will not allow it!*

Akeno watched the other queen go, then shook her head. “Mah, I suppose that is the reason behind her cold at—” she was interrupted by Mittelt and Luna both making raspberry noises in her direction and sighed. “Fine. Regardless, we’re going to reverse that order. The golems will do better up close than far away. We need to divert the Old Satan Faction’s attention to the sky to let the golems close as best they can.”

The other two women nodded and raced off to convey the go signal to the rest of their forces.

Meanwhile, Grayfia had reached the massive near-glacier that her brother had created to defend the prison until his master was ready to leave. With a wave of her hand, Grayfia shattered a large segment of it, sending the pieces flying inwards, killing and maiming until her brother regained control of them enough in midair to send them back her way, where another wave of her hand created a wall of force then shattered them into fine powder.

“Euclid... little brother. Surrender. If you attempt to fight, my orders are to bring you in one way or the other.” Grayfia’s tone was cold, but you did not need to know her well to feel the pain in her voice as she stared at her brother. Grayfia had long thought he was dead. To see him here, serving the Old Satan Faction, was a wrench she had not been prepared for when she and Sirzechs woke up to the alarm from Cocytus.

For his part, all Euclid felt upon seeing Grayfia, the big sister he had admired and loved far more than a normal brother should have, was anger and hatred. All his loving thoughts about Grayfia had shifted since he had heard of her and Sirzechs, the leader of the New Satan Faction, falling in love and marrying. He still lusted after her but no longer felt true love, just the Sin of Lust, Envy and Wrath.

“Traitor! You have forgotten what our family is meant for, what we are destined for, to serve the Lucifer Clan! If I have to beat you and drag you before my master to make you see reason, I will!” he shrieked, summoning up ice all around him, which slammed into the ice Grayfia had summoned in turn.

Before any of the other defenders could react to the strongest Queen’s sudden appearance and join in, light lances rained down from on high accompanied by lightning as Akeno began her assault. Similar spells of fire, rains of silver and so forth came from the Onmyouji while the hit wizards worked solo, each of them diving down and then back haphazardly. This worked, and all the attention of the gathered devils turned in their direction, missing the larger threat of the golems until they reached the ice wall and began to shatter it.

With more devils taking to the air to attack the newcomers, a little over half of the golems turned their attention upward, aiding their fellows and firing at any of the devils that weren’t already preoccupied with the aerial assault on the remnants of the curtain wall. They were vastly outnumbered, but the Old Satan faction had spread out, letting the golems start to cut into the defenders in one area.

Meanwhile, Luna dropped down among several of the magicians. A second later, blood flew as cutting spells, transformation, and transfiguration spells were launched from her deceptively quick wand. Small fae wings appeared behind her for a moment before she seemingly became a two dimensional figure as she dodged in between spells, then launched further attacks. While high above her, Akeno barked orders and launched lightning as Mittelt cackled wildly.

“So, that’s a no then?” Grayfia sighed faintly as she blocked another spell from her brother, taking in the battlefield with a glance. “I will try my hardest to bring you in in one piece, brother. But one way or the other, you are not getting away this time. Neither you nor your master.”

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While on the surface Euclid was having a very unhappy family reunion, Rivezem's group, who had yet to run into any real problems, came to a series of stairs leading down. Following it down, that staircase became a spiral staircase, then a short corridor, before turning into a series of zigzags.

It was at this point that things began to go wrong for them as they had already for the Hero Bloc. Slowly, as they took different turns heading deeper down into the prison, the link magic between them faded.

The first they knew of this was when one of the magicians turned to say something to a companion behind him, only to frown and look around. "Where, what... Austin, Johan and Ryuuji are all missing!"

Another magician instantly turned to look and then whirled to shout the news at the front of the column, only to notice that it was gone. When he did, he saw only those immediately around him, seven other members of the Old Satan Faction, two devils, and four other magicians. "What the..."

"Shit!" One of the devils, a little quicker on the uptake, rapidly turned around and raced back around the corner. One of the others raced after them before skidding to a stop, his claw outstretched to grab the corner as he stared at where his companion had once been. He should've been able to see him still continuing down the hallway, a long hallway that would've led back to a staircase leading back up the way they'd come.

He didn't see that. He didn't see his companion or the hallway. All you saw was a thoroughly blank wall several yards down the hallway. "Oh, no..."

Just like before, with the first few groups of followers to be split off from Cao-Cao's force the various separated devils or magicians decided to go on. After all, what else could they do? And just like with the first werewolf, they soon found themselves ambushed and overwhelmed in turn by the vengeful defenders.

Back with the group of Old Satan Faction members, Rizevim paused as he heard something from behind him. He turned around, causing Shalba and Creuserey to do the same, only to frown as he noticed how few of their followers were there. Then his eyes widened, and he stared around. "Check your wrists, fools!"

The magic had faded, and only those in direct sight of Rivezem were still there. "Dammit! Is this some trick of Cao-Cao, or... no, he needed our enchanters. The magic of his place must suck our link magic away somehow."

Creuserey was more of a magical theorist than either of the others, and he agreed that might well be possible, but he gestured to the one on Rivezem's wrist. "It won't happen to that one, though. There's no way that the Law of Similarity can be overcome. It should still work to lead us deeper into the prison and then back out again."

Rivezem nodded, still able to see the flowing bit of golden string behind them. "True. Let us continue." He smirked then, and suddenly, Shalba and Creuserey were having second thoughts about all of this. "After all, no one important has been lost so far. I'm still here."

While the others twitched a bit at that, they nodded and continued on.

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Seeing all this, Sirzechs let himself sigh in satisfaction. "Ah, I do so love it when a plan comes together, even if those caught in it are not the ones we sought." He looked back at the screen he'd been staring at before the action began outside, his eyes gleaming dangerously as he spoke slowly, with a certain diction to his words that spoke of intense control. "Well then. If you'll excuse me, I believe that Ajuka and I have a little meeting to get to. I had no idea that Rivezem was still alive, but now that I do, I have a particular interest in making certain that particular state of affairs changes."

Beside him, Ajuka snorted, yet didn't argue. *After all, most of this is being caused by societal issues, ghosts of the past, coming home to roost, and it should be us who solve those particular problems.* Within seconds the pair had moved over to the central ball of rope, tapping the rope bracelets they wore on their wrists.

"You want me to go with you?" Typhon asked, from where he was sitting next to Koneko against the outer wall of the circular room by the entrance. One set of arms was behind his head, and the others were all crossed in front of his body. He hadn't seemed at all bothered by the endless rope ball, although he had been deeply impressed by the maze itself.

"No. I don't think that's necessary. Sairaorg?"

Sairaorg Bael smirked, pushing himself to his feet. Instead of bringing in Leviathan, who was busy reaching out to the church and the Fallen to help with the upcoming runic web project, or bringing in Falbium who was doing the same on the Devil side, Lucifer had decided to reach out to the Bael Clan's heir. A large portion of this trap had been set up because a plot by his clan's hidden ruler had come to light, and it only seemed fitting to allow Sairaorg to help clean it up, something the younger man had agreed with wholeheartedly. "Sure. I call Creuserey."

"Alvenhov, can we break them up further?" Ajuka asked as Sairaorg joined them, tapping his bracelet against the rope ball.

“No. So long as they keep within sight of one another, the group will stay the same. If one of them falls even a little bit back as they go around the corner, the magic of the prison will take them. But Creuserey, Shalba and Rivezem are being incredibly careful about that right now. We can, however, put you in front of them with ease, as you’ve seen,” the Warden answered grimly.

“That will do,” the three men said as one, causing several others in the room to laugh.

Alvenhov did not laugh. Nearly eight hundred of his men, out of a force of two thousand, had died in the fighting outside, and not one of them had known this assault was coming because he, Lucifer and Ajuka had made the decision to keep the knowledge that Cocytus was a target from the guards assigned to it. All they’d known was that there might be a drill, hence why so many had been on the outer wall. Yet that had simply meant they were easier targets for Cao-Cao, Rivezem and others like them. Something that Alvenhov, the only one to be told about the plan, deeply regretted.

Still, he knew who to truly blame for that, and so, when the two Maou and the young Sairaorg moved towards the door, he called after them. “Give them each a smack for me, would you? And by smack, I mean remove a limb, my lords.”

“We can do that,” Lucifer said with a smirk, Power of Destruction glowing around his hand briefly for a moment before he stepped through the doorway with his two companions.

The three of them arrived in a specific cell that was linked to the floor Rivezem and those with him were about to reach. Just like the other ‘cells,’ there was no kind of lock on the door. Of course, even if there had been, all three of them would’ve been able to break out easily, but that didn’t matter. What did was the fact they were in the right place.

Within seconds, the trio started to hear the sound of marching feet in the distance.

Despite having lost so many of their followers, Rivezem still remained upbeat. The bracelet on his wrist was still tugging him forward, and he could still see the way out. That was all that mattered. He was more than willing to sacrifice every other member of the Old Satan Faction in order to get what he wanted. The bracelet was still tugging Rivezem forward, which meant he could still find his prize. That was all that mattered.

Finally seeing a hallway lined by a row of prison cells, he smiled widely. “Yes, yes!” *Here, Lilith must be here! Soon, soon, I will correct the mistakes of the past.* “Spread out, let us see who is in the cells and who is willing to--”

Rivezem had barely a second for his eyes to widen before a fist-sized Power of Destruction blast flashed towards him from inside the cell he was peering into. His reaction speed was fast enough to get him out of the way, as Shalba and Creuserey did the same, but he

was still staring at Sirzechs as the bolt of ravening energy went straight through the center of the group of lesser devils and magicians still following them, slaying more than half and causing the others to shriek and run.

“No, no! We must away,” Rivezem hissed, reaching into his clothing and pulling out a small, glowing crystal ball. At the same time, many of the survivors, those who weren’t grabbing at sides, arms or legs that were now missing, turned and ran... only for the magic of Cocytus to grab them.

The glowing crystal ball in Rivezem’s hand should have been glowing. It no longer was. Just like the ones that Euclid had been looking at, just like the emergency teleportation items that Cao-Cao and the others had, they were cut off, unable to find anything beyond Cocytus itself.

Rivezem stared at the ball, eyes widening, then snarled, tossing it to one side, his magical aura erupting around him to the point where the entire prison began to shake. Sirzechs followed suit, the two auras clashing in between the pair like two weather patterns slamming into one another. “Fine! If I have to go through you to get out of here, Lucifer, you will find that I am more than up to the task! I have a King Piece; I have reached the very height of my power, and even before that, I was a match for you.”

“Interesting theory. But it’s one that you’ve never been willing to put into practice, have you? Let’s find out if it’s accurate or not.” Lucifer answered, his lips curling up into a vicious snarl.

Shaking his head at his friend’s actions, Ajuka turned to look at Shalba, who was surrounded by a spinning yin-yang symbol, out of which hundreds of thousands of bees, wasps and flies began to pour. With a sigh, he Created a multi-cubed box in one hand, which began to suck the small creatures into it before charging forward faster than Shalba could track. A blow rang out that blasted him down through the floor into the corridor below, with Ajuka following after. “Well, I suppose that’s my cue as well.”

A cell over, Sairaorg had disdained the idea of any kind of banter. Instead, he had simply smashed into Creuserey, ignoring the fire and wind magic that had slammed into him, trying to slow him down. The two of them crashed into and through the wall to one side into a cell and then out the other side, the sounds of combat behind them fading as they found themselves suddenly elsewhere, warped away by the magic of Cocytus.

As the auras of the two powerhouses clashed, the very magical fabric of Cocytus began to tremble, reminding Ajuka strongly of the last few moments of the battle against Hades. Then the two super devils raced forward, slamming into one another, magical aura against magical aura.

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Back in the command center, Alvenhov sighed, waving away two of the prison personnel who were trying to yammer into his ear about the overall magical index of the prison having suddenly skyrocketed and how the underlying magical framework was beginning to suffer. “What exactly would you like me to do about it? It isn’t as if I could go up to the combatants and ask them to stop or request they only duke it out with their fists. Try to shunt as much of that magic into the physical durability side of things as you can and then the repair of our outer defenses.”

That extra durability was very much needed. Cao-Cao had recovered from his earlier shock and had decided on the better part of valor. Not having any kind of direction, not even up and down as they had traveled up and down stairs and a few slides, he had simply decided to go in a straight direction, blasting everything in front of him with the True Longinus. Given the fact that he was being shifted around along with his folk every time he passed from one segment of the prison to the other, this meant he was getting nowhere and becoming more frantic with it, as were those following him. Any magical energy that the rest of the prison could take and redistribute to strengthen the area around the Khaos Brigade group was good.

Trusting the Maou and Rias’ combat junky cousin to handle that aspect, Harry zoomed back in on Cao-Cao and those with him, suddenly pointing at the screen. “That devil woman, she’s behind the others and...” As Harry watched, the magic of the prison instantly took Roygun, teleporting her elsewhere. “That’s automatic, isn’t it? I didn’t even need to say anything. I thought you all were doing that.”

Unbeknownst to Roygun, the magic of her mask had been stripped away at the same time that the shadow bracelet on her wrist had disappeared. Obviously, a prison would need spells in place to remove anything that could obscure or confuse someone’s identity. Only full-scale Metamorph shifts from one person to another could fool that background magic, no matter how well Roygun’s mask had been made.

“Er, Yes, sir,” one of the devils at a nearby station answered, sounding a bit confused as to how to talk to Harry without Sirzechs around. “We don’t even need to watch for that part of things, although we can force shift, that is change the floor someone’s on by force if we have to. The only thing we need to mainly watch out for is if the maze shift takes them somewhere we don’t want them to be. Since it’s random, that’s been known to happen.”

Harry looked over the others with him, then to Typhon. *She’s supposedly a heavy hitter, which means me, Yasaka, Cu, or the little titan.* “Do you think you can handle her?”

The titan in the form of a young boy snorted, his form rippling, skin becoming scales, arms suddenly splitting, becoming several dozen arms before reforming in his normal everyday

body. "Be serious. Although if this place is already having trouble remaining material, weird word, I might have to make certain the fight stays physical."

Alvenhov snorted at that, looking over the young boy. "Roygun might like that." The young Belphegor clan head's fetish for young boys was well known among devilkind, although unlike among humans, they really didn't affect how people saw her.

"Perverted woman," Koneko grumbled, then looked at her younger-seeming companion. "You be careful."

Not certain what he needed to be careful about, Typhon shrugged. "I have no idea what you're all talking about, but I was getting bored. Besides, the faster we get this done, the faster you all, with your big brains and knowledge, can get back to helping Mother. That's my goal here, remember?" *That, and playing football with Lily and the rest, anyway. That's really fun. Who knew having just two legs would have an upside? But all this is, is... what did Kunou say about that game? A side quest? Yeah, all this is a side quest to me.*

With that, Typhon stood up and headed towards the rope ball in the center of the room, tapping his bracelet against it. When it glowed, and a nearby devil nodded his way to indicate the spell had been renewed, he headed towards the door, his four fists clenching and unclenching.

OOOOOOO

As she strode down a seemingly endless hallway, Roygun Belphegor felt herself questioning her life choices. Initially, she had wanted to see how well she could do in the Rating Games and had been somewhat appalled at how poorly she had been able to do on her own. That blow to Roygun's pride had transformed into a kind of self-loathing that had made her easy pickings for the offer of special training from a Bael Clan member who approached her. Through that go-between, Roygun had heard about the King Piece. She had beaten off several members of the Bael clan who had wanted it for themselves, as well as other young devils who had only known they were competing for some powerful prize, killing several in matches before Roygun was allowed to take one of the two King Pieces that Zekram Bael had somehow gotten his hands one.

At which point, it only seemed fair and proper to repay that gift with service in a few ways. But the need for more power, for more freedom to use her new power, had pushed Roygun into making connections that, looking back on it, might not have been for the best.

And now here I am, completely alone, in a prison that is designed to stop you from escaping no matter what, Roygun reflected as she blasted aside several walls. Her magic, Crack, was able to cut the connection between those walls and the overarching magical matrix of the

prison, reducing them to rubble with ease, but that hadn't allowed her to find her way back to the others or make much headway escaping either.

Hmm... my magic should let me simply cut my way through this maze. After all, isn't that what that one human hero did centuries ago when he was faced with a Gordian knot? But it doesn't seem to be. It's as if the magic is able to just seep back in after a moment. I'd need to keep up the spell far beyond my line of sight to make much headway. Is this place not just transporting me from various places but also messing with my sense of direction? Am I just going in circles, or am I simply being transported around randomly in a prison the size of the Sahara?

Blasting her way through from one area to another, Roygun found herself suddenly surrounded by cages. None of those cages were filled at the moment, and she frowned, staring all around her before zeroing in on a cell that seemed to house something moving. The only problem was it was a cell with no door, and she backed away, preparing her Crack Magic again. "Well, this is a fine pickle."

From out of one of the cages, a young boy stood stepped, and Roygun smiled widely, looking him up and down, some of her controlled unease fading. "Mah! You're just my type. I don't suppose I've wandered into the young boy's section of this prison for some reason? Although why there would be young boys in prison here, I don't know, but if there are, I'd like to take it up with the manager. Pretty young boys are a treasure that should be shared."

Typhon's brows furrowed, wondering what all that was about and why the phrase 'I need an adult' had just gone through his mind at the look the woman across from him was giving him. *To say nothing of the strange idea of finding Lily and hiding behind her.* Typhon shook those thoughts off for now, stating aloud, "I'm supposed to ask you to surrender before I beat you into a pulp. Although the second option sounds way more fun for me."

"OOOH, feisty, aren't you? You want to pound me~?" Roygun teased. She didn't have the best magical senses in the world, and although she could sense that this young man was special in some way, she'd never seen any reports or rumors about him. "Your, what, a new Knight or Rook to one of the Maou, sent here while they deal with the other intruders?" Roygun knew that there wouldn't be a point in trapping them all here unless the people behind this ambush brought in enough firepower to finish them off, and she was equally clear-sighted when it came to her place on the power scale. I'm sorry to say, even using their power won't be enough to..."

"Enough talking. Surrender, or else I'll squish you," the boy interrupted, and then he began to grow. And grow, and grow, while his body began to change.

“Oh...” Roygun murmured as she stared up at the form of the Many-Handed Titan, her magical aura flaring out around her, causing tiny cracks to appear in the walls, floor, ceiling and air appeared all around her. “Not so cute after all.”

OOOOOOO

Back in the command center, Harry frowned pensively. He had hoped that Cao-Cao’s group would become split up some more, but it looked as if that wasn’t going to happen. Despite the fact that the last bit of magic in the rope bracelet had faded, and they had now no idea how to get out or go forward, the central group of four was doing a good job keeping the rest together now that Roygun had been separated from them, aided by the fact that they weren’t going around corners any longer. Rather, they were simply following through the straight line bath that Cao-Cao’s True Longinue carved out of the prison. “It looks as if we’ll have to attack them directly to beat them down. What a shame.”

“Hah, for you, maybe,” Cú snickered. ‘For me, I’d be right furious if all I had to do was watch from here until the maze did them in.’

“Ara, there’s no chance of that, Cu-han,” Yasaka murmured, staring at some of the readouts on a screen that Alvenhov had, until a moment ago, been looking at. He’d been called away by one of his men. “Good grief, if Sirzechs and that oldster keep on pumping out magic like this, the whole dimension might start to come apart.”

“Feh, so you say. Still, it’ll be nice to—”

“Wait, what the fuck?” Alvenhov’ raised voice interrupted Cú and brought Harry’s attention around to where he was standing behind a young devil sitting at another station. “What do you mean we’ve got movement down on the First Floor!?”

That worthy was now pointed at the screen, shaking his head. “I have no idea how they got there, sir, but there’s something there. Lord Potter’s sensors caught them, and I hit the draining array. It didn’t work to tear aside whatever magic they were using to hide themselves from our video balls, but there’s someone on that level. None of our guards should be on that level at all, and we for sure were keeping an eye on things so the random effect wouldn’t dump anyone on that level or any of the ones with strategic-target level prisoners.”

Harry was out of his chair and moving instantly, meeting Cú at the receiver along with Kiba? and the rest of his group. Even Koneko, who had resolutely stayed as far away from the ball of rope in the center of the room as possible to this point, joined them. Even if she kept her eyes tightly shut as she moved.

Unfortunately, there was literally nothing to see. Whoever Harry’s sensor array had spotted; they were still invisible to the Devil-style video balls. And Harry hadn’t put down any

kind of runic array that would work to reveal the person his sensor discovered to those video balls. "Damn it... So, two of them, different shapes. Male and female, maybe?"

The sensors Harry had put down relied on two things: the movement of the air and heat. It was surprising how many Invisibility spells didn't take into account heat, making the people behind them somewhat easy to discover with the right equipment. Here, however, the mysterious twosome had taken that into account. However, displaced air was something that no spell could stop but Harry's own invisibility fog, previously the cloak that he had used so often in his years at Hogwarts.

Growling, Alvenhov looked over the various control rods and crystal balls, frowning. "Force shift them away, full floor shift. Or if we can't shift the floor away, then shift the cage to somewhere else."

Nodding, the younger devil sitting at that console tapped one of the rods. It didn't change, and nothing seemed to happen, causing him to frown. He then tapped another control, which should have shifted the single large cage on Floor One elsewhere. One of the small gold globes should have emitted a light, but nothing happened. "Sir, I, I don't understand it, something is blocking our control!"

Growling, Alvenhov moved the younger devil aside with a shove, taking his place. For several moments, Harry watched as Alvenhov tried to get through whatever was blocking the control room's access to Floor One, to no avail.

"And what's on the First Floor?"

Alvenhov hesitated, but at the glare that Harry gave him, the older devil sighed. "Samael. It's, it's honestly the reason why it's called the First Floor. That thing was there well before the prison was even completed."

Growling, Harry nodded. *Samael, the Dragon Eater, the same thing we thought Cao-Cao was after.* "Right. We haven't caught Cao-Cao and the Old Satan Faction. We've caught all three. It only makes sense for them and Cao-Cao to have shared a target."

"On the one hand, that's good. But on the other, Sirzechs and Ajuka have already left, which leaves us and our group to deal with both the four remaining serious fighters from the Khaos Brigade and these two," Kiba murmured. From beside Harry. "That's not going to be fun unless we can pull in Typhon or someone else once they finish their target."

"Fun or not, I need to be among those to deal with those two. No one else has as wide a repertoire to deal with anything Akhenaten and Nefertiti can throw into the fight." He looked over at Cu, who shrugged laconically.

“Aye, I wanted to be one of those who chased those two foxes down, but I don’t need to be. So long as I get some good fighting out of this, I’ll be happy. Besides,” the shining sun of Ireland pointed at one of the other screens, showing Cao-Cao at the head of his little group, including the still groaning, moaning Hercules, who was being carried by Connla at the moment. “That one and the Grecian have both got spears o’ their own. It’ll be interesting to fight either or both of ‘em.” *And the other youngster is giving me a weird kind of feeling when I look at him closely. We’ll need to see what that means before anything else.*

The others all looked at one another, and Yubelluna held up her hand. “I think me, Kiba, Loup and Koneko are the ones best to match up to those so-called heroes. That leaves you and Yasaka to deal with the oldsters.”

To one side, Koneko sighed but nodded. She’d wanted to be the one to avenge her sister’s spiritual maiming, but so long as it was done right, Koneko wasn’t going to complain.

“I think we’ve got a plan, then.” Harry nodded. “Yubelluna, you’re in charge of the attack. I know I can’t trust Cú to actually think of the rest of you.”

“Hah, true enough,” Cú admitted. “I’m a blunt object, not much of a leader, ya know?”

With that, the Kuoh Clan broke up, and Harry and Yasaka quickly found themselves the last two there. “Well, shall we, my lady?”

“Mah, although I rather think that only one couple is going to be walking away from this group date,” Yasaka quipped, and the pair moved over to the central ball of rope.

OOOOOOO

The maintenance shaft eventually took Akhenaten and Nefertiti to the floor where their target resided in sole glory, although given how massive the prison was, having the maintenance shaft deposit them where it did still meant they were nearly thirty minutes of walking away from their prize, and neither wanted to use spells that could perhaps be sensed by the various defensive and observation style enchantments at work in the prison. This, like all the other fights going on, was made all the harder by the material world of Cocytus attempting to become immaterial thanks to the massive amount of magic that Sirzechs and his opponent were still releasing.

The two of them found themselves stumbling, stopping, and even crawling at one point, yet they kept going. With the door of the maintenance shaft locked in the open position, the magic of Cocytus could not change this level at all, which allowed them to continue, the hallway becoming wider and taller as they went. Soon, they found themselves staring into a large cage, a cage large enough to provide for a Wizarding World giant.

It needed to be so large for the creature within, for it was huge, as large as a giant, but no giant in form. The individual within the cage looked like a naga, a mixture of man and snake. Yet most of the time, when someone pictured a Naga, it was with a simple, smooth connection between the lower body of a snake and the upper body of a man, one that looked natural. Nothing about this creature looked natural.

The snake aspect looked twisted and malformed, with scales sticking out in places, while others were ridiculously smooth-looking. The tail looked like a strange amalgamation between a cobra and a rattlesnake as if the creature had been caught between shifting from one snake form to another. Worse was the connection between the top portion of the body and the rest. It looked almost like an angel had been somehow fused into the body of a large snake or perhaps caught in the position of changing from one to another, frozen halfway between the two forms for eternity.

The upper body looked like that of an angel, if malformed, with bones sticking out almost to the point of bursting through its skin in various places. The creature's wings were stumps, as if, again, it had been caught mid-change from one form to another. One side of its stomach was distended, the other almost looking toned to the point of showing muscles. It had arms, but one spindly arm was longer than the other, and the shorter hand ended in six fingers instead of the normal five.

Yet the malformed look prevalent in the rest of its body was preferable to what resided on its head. There, there was no face, no mouth, no eyes and no nose. No hair, either. It was simply a blank face. Looking at it, Akhenaten and Nefertiti both got the impression that someone had created this creature out of clay and had not bothered to give it any details that could lead one to think it had any kind of personality or identity. Instead, it was simply an object of horrible art.

Yet all of that was not important. What was, was the fact this creature was a Sacred Gear, an object that could be wielded if given the right ability.

"So, this is it. This is the anti-Dragon weapon that the upstart Yahweh created. Samael, the snake of Eden, the Dragon Eater. I wonder, among his many other powers, did he anticipate Ophis remaining within the earthen sphere? Would Yawheh, the God Above All, approve of our plans going forward?" Nefertiti murmured, staring at the creature.

"Perhaps, perhaps not. I do not believe that Yahweh was in his right mind when he created this creature. The God of the Bible was always a bit of a sophist, but he was never deliberately cruel to his creations. Yet he was when it came to Samael, striking him down for his role in corrupting the garden. You can almost feel the hatred for dragons radiating off of it, can't

you?" Akhenaten murmured back. "And here it is. Here, trapped in a cage, with its purpose unfulfilled yet it's power still existing."

How this creature came to be here in the prison of Cocytus, no one really knew any longer. Its imprisonment was one of the few signs of, if not understanding, then mutual agreement between Lucifer and his previous master, his Father and Creator. Why that was, how this thing came to be, not even Nefertiti and Akhenaten, the two oldest beings on Earth did not know the answer to. They had been keeping their heads down during the War of Heaven and hell, having seen what had occurred to other pantheons that had challenged the might of polytheistic religion.

Yet they knew that at the time, dragons had been making far more trouble than any of the single pantheons could have, slaughtering whole bushels of angels and that the creature that had been spawned from the abyss below even Hell, 666, had been part-dragon too. Where that creature came from, where it was now, neither knew nor cared to speculate about. But it was very obvious that Yahweh had developed an intrinsic hatred of dragons long before his final sacrifice.

"And now here we are, with the means of saving Earth from another draconic enemy, ready to our hand," Akhenaten murmured, staring at the creature. Or rather, the Sacred Gear, one of the first created. At the moment, it was in its awakened form, but it could be harnessed, shaped to a useful form by anyone who could reach out a hand. *And that hand will be ours!*

Without further ado, the married couple moved forward, reaching out their hands only for the entryway behind them to shift suddenly and for Nefertiti to hiss, grab her husband, and hurl herself and him away from a series of magical blasts and controlled spellfire that had just passed through where they had been standing.

This included a blast of Fiendfyre, which abruptly snuffed out. The will of the fire was so swiftly crushed by the user that had any wizard or witch been there, they might well have gaped in astonishment.

Neither Nefertiti nor Akhenaten did, simply rolling and twisting around, bringing up spells on their clothing and in hand as they stared at Yasaka and Harry as they came through a doorway that was very much not the doorway into the cage that the two elderly Egyptian shapeshifters had used a moment before. This didn't stop their various illusion spells from fading under another wave of power from their attackers.

"Harry Potter!" Akhenaten hissed. "Yet again, you plague me."

"No matter how large, a snake's method of hunting will remain the same, linked to its instincts. A cobra or viper will strike and hide unseen, and an anaconda will slither and attack

from behind, gobbling its meal whole. We forced you out of the grass once. Did you think we did not understand what your personalities were like? Admittedly, you're appearing here so suddenly is a surprise, as is the number of enemies we are having to deal with at the moment. Something I believe I can lay at your feet. Regardless, if you wish to catch a snake, you discover where it wishes to appear, and you call upon a mongoose. TIK TIK TIK." Harry calmly stated, stepping to one side, Yasaka moving to the other, forcing the married couple to split their attention in either direction.

Akhenaten bowed mockingly while Nefertiti essayed a small giggle, bringing her hand up to her mouth even as she used the move to hide her mouthing a spell that would greatly enhance both herself and her husband's physical abilities. "It was indeed the two of us. A plan long in the making, longer than the finding. For thousands of years, we've known where Samael was hidden and years during which we knew we would need it to deal with Ophis eventually. We had hoped to move against it as gods, but while you and yours cut off our energy source, the spell itself seems to work well enough."

Actually, it hadn't worked as well as Akhenaten and Nefertiti had hoped it would. When they had supped so greedily at the energy of belief and the souls of the Egyptians trapped near their pillars, they had hoped to have still thousands upon thousands more to give them a ready supply of continual belief energy, then use that sudden spurt in order to gather still more believers the world over. They hadn't been able to, but there were other ways to rise to deification status and they were more than willing to use any such resource.

"So, is this the part where we exchange taunts and banter a little bit? I've always enjoyed that aspect of most movies when it comes down to the penultimate villain and hero meeting," Akhenaten mused, turning to keep Harry in his sights as his wife went back to back with him, looking at Yasaka.

"Fifty-one million," Harry intoned softly, shifting into his werewolf form as he did.

"I'm sorry? Is that supposed to mean something to me?" Akhenaten asked.

"It certainly does not to me, husband. A number is just a number after all," Nefertiti added, knowing that number was probably significant and, considering Harry's overall personality, probably had to do something with Egypt, but willing to get under Harry's skin if possible.

"That is the number of Egyptians that you tried to kill, men and women who descended from those who worship you pharaohs as gods on Earth. And each one of them deserves to have your heart carved out and handed to their grieving families, to the survivors left behind. No, I'm not going to banter with you. I'm just going to get to carving," Harry intoned, and with that, the fight was on.

End Chapter

One thing I have struggled throughout this work with is the different internal divisions within the devils and Khaos Brigade. I'm positive that the other factions have them, too, but those two have been the most annoying. So, if it gets confusing here, I apologize.

The scene is now set for a series of battles. It's up in the air how many of them I will show, but this way, they are all already in the favor of Potter and co. and what kind of trap would it be if it was any different?