

“What the hell was that?” Harry asked as he gazed down at the spot where the fire-throwing monster had stood a moment prior.

“You...you killed the demon,” a voice came, and they turned to see a terrified-looking young man emerge from behind one of the ruined buildings.

“Demon?” Ciri asked.

“How the hell did you do that?” the man asked, and they all tensed as they realized that he was wearing body armor

“Calm down,” Harry said softly, hitting the man with powerful calming and compulsion charms. “Who are you and where are we?”

“I’m Private Mark Black with the ARC, and you’re in what was Phoenix, Arizona,” the man replied, and they all nodded.

“That explains the dry heat, though the burning remains of the city might be contributing to that too,” Akeno murmured. “What happened here?”

“Hell happened,” Mark replied. “Portals started opening up here a few months ago, and those...things popped out of them. We managed to contain most of the outbreaks to start with, but only barely, and things are getting worse. There’s some sort of super-pest in Central Europe that’s completely out of control. The death rate has spiked and...how did you destroy that imp? I’ve never seen anything like it; you didn’t even have a gun.”

“We have little need of guns,” Hermione replied. “Tell me, have you ever heard of something called Argent Energy?”

“Heard of it?” the man scoffed. “That shit might be what got us into that mess.”

“Explain,” Rias commanded.

“We don’t know for sure, but most of us used to work for the Union Aerospace Corporation, the company that produced and supplied it,” Mark replied.

“You’re a soldier, though,” Koneko pointed out.

“I was part of their security force,” Mark replied. “When all this shit started going bad, our facilities on Mars got overwhelmed first and that...that was a nightmare even worse than this. I don’t know if the energy production itself drew the demon’s attention or if it was just the cultists but...”

“Okay, slow down,” Rias said. “Mars facilities?”

“You...how do you not know about that?” Mark asked, confused. “We’ve been on Mars my whole life.”

“Ciri, you’re sure this isn’t our planet but just in the future, right?” Hermione asked the ashen-haired beauty in her own language.

“I’m positive we’re in another universe,” Ciri replied.

“What’s this cult you mentioned?” Harry asked.

“They worship the demons,” Mark replied. “Half the company seemed to be nuts, not that we realized it. The saner ones among us immediately went with Dr. Samuel Hayden when he formed the ARC...Armed Response Coalition. Have you lot been under a rock this whole time?”

“Something like that,” Harry muttered. “If we wanted to get our hands on a sample of this Argent Energy, where would we find some?”

Mark squirmed at that, his suspicion at the question strong enough to make him resist the compulsion for a moment, though he quickly failed and said, “You can still get the synthetic stuff but goodness knows how long that will remain viable with the world falling apart.”

“Synthetic stuff?” Rias asked warily.

“Our supply of the pure energy got cut off when everything went to shit on Mars,” Mark replied. “It’s what powered the world and the energy crisis that ensued after it was cut off was...rough, but the doctor managed to synthesize it with an artifact he found there.”

“Do you know if there’s any of the pure energy on Earth?” Rias asked, wondering if the synthetic version would work for the Philosopher’s Stone.

“There might still be a few power cells in the larger ARC labs,” Mark replied. “They studied them extensively while they were trying to find a way out of the crisis.”

“I see,” Harry nodded, peering inside his mind to see if the soldier knew the location of any of these labs and smiling when he found what he wanted. “Listen, we’ll take you to your base so you can get checked out. I’m guessing that the rest of your squad was...”

“They’re all gone,” Mark sighed, shaking his head. “I’m the...ahh!”

Before they could ask what was wrong, a ball of blue plasma flew between them, striking the soldier and melting off his head. They whipped around and gawked at the floating creature who had drawn close while they were distracted.

“That looks like a meatball with features,” Koneko muttered, flying up into the air to meet the monster.

“From what I managed to pull out of Mark’s head before, well...they call that thing a cacodemon,” Harry said, watching as it regarded Koneko with genuine curiosity, clearly not being used to seeing humans fly.

That curiosity gave way to murderous rage a moment later, and it spat out a ball of blue plasma at her, which she deftly strafed away from before moving in. Her speed took the monster by surprise, and it tried to move back so it could lunge at her, but she was too quick and quickly shoved her armored fist through its single eye. A moment later, they heard Ddraig roar, and a burst of green energy blasted out through the back of the creature, killing it instantly.

“We should find a calmer spot and talk,” Hermione suggested, and Harry nodded, picking up Ciri and flying up into the air.

“Even with the things I’ve seen, this is really bad,” she sighed. “These monsters seem even worse than the ones from my world.”

The scene below them was one of devastation, an entire city reduced to blood-soaked rubble. The area they’d appeared in turned out to be one of the least affected parts of it, and they quickly turned themselves invisible to avoid detection by the swarming army below.

“Wow, I can’t see myself at all,” Ciri murmured.

“A disillusionment charm,” Harry explained as he flew off away from the city, landing by the side of a ruined road about a mile to the north.

Thanks to the master-servant bond most of them could sense where he was despite the invisibility and Rias made sure to reach out to Kiba to ensure that he followed them along. The moment they landed, they undid their spells and looked around, still quite wary.

“I’d suggest that we help these poor people, but I don’t know where we’d even start,” Hermione muttered.

“We’ve walked into an apocalypse, one that the humans of this world seem to have brought upon themselves and which is, frankly, beyond our abilities,” Rias replied. “We handled ourselves against the two demons we faced easily enough, but some of the ones we saw from the sky...”

“Some of the things here seem frightfully powerful, and there are legions of them,” Harry sighed. “If the rest of the planet looks as bad as Phoenix does, humanity here is screwed.”

“What we seek might not be, though,” Kiba said. “Did you manage to get the location of one of the labs Mark thought we might find a sample of Argent Energy from?”

“I did, and one seems to be far and away our best bet,” Harry replied. “It’s one of the principal laboratories of the UAC, and it’s under the current headquarters of the ARC. It’s not fallen to the demons yet, as far as Mark knew, and while I doubt their security is anything to sneeze at, I’d rather be forced to get past a bunch of humans undetected than fight my way through a legion of those things.”

“Keep in mind that these particular humans are likely a little more advanced than we are,” Hermione said. “They’re fighting against monsters with magical abilities too, so they might very well have ways to detect us that we can’t account for.”

“Our magic disrupts electrical technology,” Luna murmured, “or at least it did to the technology on our Earth, so their detection methods might not work around us at all. Where is this lab?”

“On the other end of the continent, sadly,” Harry replied. “It’s near the old American capital.”

“You really think this might be our best option?” Rias asked.

“The other labs he knew of that might have what we’re looking for were either in cities that had already fallen or locations currently besieged by demons,” Harry replied. “This one, at least, was still secure and I’d really rather not fight more of those things than we have to. We came to replicate Flamel’s success, not fight a war we still know almost nothing about.”

“How far away is this place?” Ciri asked.

“Probably a couple thousand miles,” Kiba replied, making her jaw drop. “North America is huge from what I’ve read.”

“A couple thousand...we’ll be here for days,” Ciri spluttered.

“No, we won’t,” Harry replied. “One of the reasons why I plucked the locations out of Mark’s mind rather than just ask him where they were is because it let me get visuals of them. I can teleport us there.”

“Oh, thank goodness,” Ciri sighed.

“You’d think you of all people would have thought of portals first,” Koneko snickered, and Ciri rolled her eyes.

“Even I need to have some clue where I’m going to avoid traveling at complete random,” she muttered as Harry opened up a magic circle. Admiring the glowing red symbols, the former princess said, “I’ll admit that your teleportation method looks better than mine does.”

“It is, alas, far more limited,” Harry smiled. “Come, we should get going. Given how far away this is, it’s probably at least a full time zone over, and it might actually be night there already, given how the sun looks here.”

“That will be nice,” Rias said as she stepped into the circle with him.

“Wait, are devils actually stronger at night?” Ciri asked as the others crowded around the circle. “I didn’t think you were serious.”

“It makes a bit of a difference,” Akeno replied.

They vanished in a flash of red light and appeared just outside a building much like the ones that Flamel had described.

“I guess that glass and metal architecture trend the muggles are so fond of continued here,” Luna murmured as she looked around. “I don’t really like it, to be honest.”

“DEMONIC THREAT DETECTED,” a robotic voice sounded across the area, and they froze, looking around and trying to sense what the voice was talking about.

When, a moment later, all they noticed was a number of heavily armed men rushing towards their position, they realized that they were the threat and quickly vanished, flying up into the air about thirty seconds before the men turned the corner and reached their position.

“I don’t see anything,” one of them muttered. “Is that damn thing even working?”

“Shh!” another of the soldiers hissed. “There’s a type of demon that can turn invisible. It’s a four-legged horned thing that really likes to gore people.”

“Because of course some of them can turn invisible too,” Harry thought to himself.

“DEMONIC THREAT ELIMINATED,” the robotic voice called out, and the soldiers all relaxed.

“Must have been a false alarm,” one of them sighed, shaking his head. “Back inside, men.”

“Yes, sir!” the rest of them replied, following their commander back towards the building.

“*Follow them in,*” Rias’ voice rang in all their heads and they nodded, following after the soldiers and slipping in behind them. “*I cast linking spells on all of us while we were on the road back in Arizona.*”

“*What the hell was that?*” Koneko asked before she could continue.

“*I think the detector registered our teleportation as being demonic in origin,*” Hermione replied.

“*Why did it think we were eliminated?*” Luna asked.

“*My guess would be that however it detects the demons, it only picked up our magic as being like them while we didn’t trip anything up ourselves,*” Rias replied. “*We’ll need to keep that in mind.*”

“*We’re in here at least,*” Akeno said. “*We should have a look around and see what sort of security we’re dealing with here.*”

“*In all likelihood, we’re going to need to take control of someone high up to let us through,*” Rias said. “*We could try replicating their armor to make it easier to move about here. Walking around invisible is fun and all, but I’d rather not have to dodge people.*”

They all thought that was a great idea and spent the next couple minutes conjuring suits of armor for themselves. The ARC soldiers all wore full helmets that completely obscured their identity, which was helpful, and soon enough, they were all so well-disguised that they could reveal themselves. Hermione reminded them to look out for cameras and took them an additional moment to find a spot where they could just appear without it looking suspicious.

“*We’ll likely be asked to identify ourselves at some point,*” Koneko pointed out. Lowering her voice, she whispered, “*Should I look taller than I am? I do look kind of ridiculous like this.*”

“*I’m sure there are female soldiers in this world, futuristic as it seems,*” Hermione replied, “*and at any rate, we’re not going to let ourselves be questioned too extensively.*”

“*The best way to avoid questioning is to appear like you belong wherever you are,*” Rias said. “*These suits and prop guns should be enough to avoid detection for the most part. Now let’s have a look around and see if we can get a sense of where we should be looking for these energy cells.*”

They made their way through, letting Rias take the lead. As the daughter of a powerful noble family, she’d been raised since she was born to behave like she belonged absolutely anywhere and walked with the natural confidence that came from such an upbringing. They looked around as casually as they could, taking in what turned out to be a very clean, simply designed facility.

“*This world must have at least a century of technological development on ours,*” Hermione thought to herself. “*It looks like something out of Star Wars.*”

“*Out of what?*” Ciri asked.

“*A movie trilogy my...father was fond of,*” Hermione replied, feeling her heart clench as she thought of him.

Harry reached out subtly to rub her back comfortingly, and she smiled at him, only to remember she was wearing a helmet much like his.

“Soldiers!” a voice barked, and they all froze, turning to look as a man in armor just like theirs came over, the badge on his chest a little more ornate than the ones they’d used as templates for their own. “Those ID badges of yours look quite strange.”

“I...” Harry went to say.

“They’re downright clean,” the man finished jovially, making them all relax a little. “Are you fresh recruits?”

“Yes, we are, Sir,” Harry replied and the man cocked his head.

“A Brit?” he asked. “I’m sorry about London. It was a fine city before those bastards got to it.”

“Indeed it was,” Harry nodded, “*Imperio*.”

The man went stiff as the curse took hold of his mind and then relaxed completely, losing himself in the disturbingly comfortable haze that it afflicted him with.

“Tell me your name and rank,” Harry commanded.

“Lieutenant Kyle Roberts,” the man replied as they heard a pair of other soldiers approaching them.

“Walk with us,” Harry said. As the lieutenant did so, they passed the pair, who didn’t say a word to any of them, and Harry peered into his mind, looking for any indication that this facility might have what they’d come for, smiling when he saw images of the lab under their feet. “Tell me, do you have authorization to enter the laboratory downstairs?”

“I do,” the lieutenant replied. “There are few places in this facility that I don’t have authorization to enter.

“Why not just root through his head for that?” Ciri asked quietly, making sure no one nearby could hear them, and Harry shook his head.

“It can take time to look through someone’s mind, and it is faster to just ask questions unless you’re looking for images,” Hermione replied for him.

“Do you know if the lab has any original argent power cells?” Harry asked, not having seen anything like that specifically in his mind, and the man shrugged.

“I’m not paid to know what the eggheads work on,” Kyle replied and Harry sighed.

“Alright, well, you’re going to get us down there and...”

“LARGE DEMONIC THREAT DETECTED,” the same robotic voice as before rang out through the intercom. “ALL PERSONNEL MUST REPORT TO THE NORTH ENTRANCE NOW.”

“Fuck,” Harry muttered, grabbing the lieutenant’s keycard and willing him to go respond to that threat as he would normally.

The sound of marching reached their ears, and he quickly turned Ciri invisible before cloaking himself, with the rest of them following suit almost immediately. They watched the armored man rush off into battle and huddled into the nearest empty room, wanting to avoid the dozens of soldiers who quickly passed by them.

“So much for avoiding the demons,” Akeno muttered.

“I’m sure this place has weathered attacks before, and the threat should actually make it easier for us, move about undetected,” Rias replied. “That keycard you swiped, will it let us into the lab?”

“Into the lab and beyond,” Harry replied. “We just have to hope that, should this facility actually have the energy cells we’re looking for, they’re not locked away in a room it can’t get us into.”

“Well, on the bright side, the scientists down there likely won’t be going off to join the fight, so if we need help getting into more restricted areas, we should be able to get them to do it,” Hermione sighed, wishing she could do more about the threat closing in on them.

“There are too many of them for us to take alone,” Rias said, sensing what the brunette was thinking even if she couldn’t outright hear it.

“It’s true,” Harry sighed. “From what I saw in the lieutenant’s mind, there might be a whole planet full of them, to say nothing of what’s happened on Mars. I don’t think the people here have much hope, but I also don’t think we could do much to help them.”

“They’re just doomed?” Luna asked.

“It seems this whole world is,” Rias sighed. “I envy Flamel for getting to come here as early as he did.”

“He didn’t mention anything like this, that’s for sure,” Harry muttered as they reached the entrance to the lab. He held the lieutenant’s keycard against the sensor and opened the door as quickly as he could, holding it until they’d all gotten in.

“They really like metal,” Luna murmured as she looked around. “I don’t think we’ve seen a single part of this facility yet that wasn’t covered in metal panels to one extent or another.”

“It makes walking annoying,” Koneko muttered, the constant quiet clanging she’d heard since they entered the place having bothered her sensitive ears.

“Well hopefully we won’t be here much longer,” Rias murmured, going still as the sound a heavy crash above them rang down.

“DEMONIC THREAT LEVEL INCREASING,” the robotic voice announced, and they sighed.

“We need to evacuate!” a terrified voice cried out.

“Evacuate to where?” another asked. “If even this facility isn’t safe where the fuck could we go?”

“We’re not...evacuating,” a robotic voice declared. “Our soldiers will hold off this latest incursion. Continue your work, so that I might aid them.”

“Yes, Dr. Hayden,” the first man sighed and the otherworlders all looked intrigued at that.

“That’s the Dr. Hayden that Mark guy mentioned?” Luna asked. “He sounds...not human.”

“He sounds robotic, which might well be because that’s what he is,” Hermione replied. “We have no idea what sort of technology we’re dealing with here, and it’s entirely possible that in this world it isn’t impossible to transfer your consciousness to a robotic form.”

“Seriously?” Ciri asked.

“I’ve read about weirder things,” Hermione replied.

They moved closer to the voices they’d heard before, both because they wanted to see just what they were dealing with and because they figured that at least one of them would be likely to know if there were any argent energy cells around. They remained invisible, knowing that the presence of soldiers down there would look suspicious with the crisis clearly unfolding above, and when they finally reached the room that the voices they’d heard before had come from, Rias and Harry stopped so abruptly in shock that the others bumped into them.

The being stretched out across the operating table was humanoid in shape, but that was where the comparison began and ended. He was huge, perhaps just a foot shorter than Hagrid, and thin, with a narrow torso and long, narrow limbs. Being made of metal, he didn’t need to be bulky to be strong, and they imagined he was quite strong, yet if the damage done to him was any indication, it hadn’t been enough. One of his legs was shorn nearly off, while the other one looked like it had teeth marks in it, something that was terrifying to think about.

Parts of his torso still showed the white, gleaming chrome that parts of him had once been, while the rest was so covered in soot and singe that it was barely noticeable. He had a single slit on his head that glowed blue, and from the way he looked at the men working on repairing the damage, they figured it was supposed to be an eye.

“Wow he’s...” Luna went to say, when she noticed something odd. “He doesn’t feel human.”

He really didn’t, feeling distinctly alien instead. The demons they’d encountered had all had a distinct wrongness to them, feeling undeniably evil and oddly tortured as well, and this Hayden figure didn’t feel like them, but neither did he feel particularly human.

“Sir...if I may, shouldn’t we be trying harder to find *him*?” one of the men asked, and Dr. Hayden shook his head.

“In time *he* will find us, I’m sure,” Dr. Hayden replied. “If we fail, certainly he will. It is his nature, the singular obsession that fuels his life of carnage. We can still contain this threat, but if we don’t, he will come and he will rip and tear until he drowns this planet in their blood.”

“If we found him now, though,” the man insisted, grunting as he finally managed to remove the more damaged leg. “There, now we can hammer this back into shape and try to reinforce it.”

“Be quick about it,” Dr. Hayden ordered. “Finding him would require us to pull critical resources from our efforts against the demons here and might be for nothing. The last known coordinates we have on him would have become useless within the day, and he can be most...evasive when he wants to be.”

“The Slayer could just make his way back to Mars, though,” the other man said. “The demonic presence on that planet has to be enough to matter to him.”

“Again, we would need to pull resources away from here and would be doing so on a maybe,” Dr. Hayden replied, quieting down as the deafening sound of metal clanging started echoing through the laboratory.

“We should find the man who left,” Rias projected to them. *“He’s fully human and, from the look of him, likely more familiar with this lab than the lieutenant was.”*

“He’s also no longer with the oddly scary robot who feels like nothing we’ve ever come across before,” Akeno added.

Harry picked up Ciri, and they all flew away, not wanting to test whether or not the robot’s hearing was good enough to notice their steps. The sound of metal clanging against metal got louder and louder as they went, and they ended up having to cast spells to shield their ears from it. After a moment they found the man and saw that he was operating some sort of machine that had heated the robot’s leg until it was glowing yellow and was now forcing it back into shape. Harry peered inside his mind without a word, figuring that finding the images of the energy cells he was looking for wouldn’t take long, only to freeze when he realized that all of the man’s most recent memories of them were images he’d seen on a computer screen.

“Fuck,” he muttered, and the man yelped, whipping around.

“What the...who are...” he went to ask, only to go still as Harry hit him with calming and compulsion charms.

“I’m looking for energy cells containing the original Argent Energy,” he said. “Are there any here?”

“No,” the man replied. “We used up the last of them ages ago.”

“Shit,” Rias muttered. “We could try taking samples of the synthetic version, but if it doesn’t work...”

“We’d end up forced to either give up or return to this nightmare world,” Harry muttered.

“I just realized I forgot to check in with Gnarl,” Hermione murmured, bringing her ring to her mouth. “Are you there? Can you hear me?”

“Are there any energy cells left containing the original version of Argent Energy?” Harry asked, and the man nodded. “Where?”

“There was a storehouse of them in a facility on Mars that we never managed to clear out,” the man replied. “I used to work there before everything went wrong. It was only by sheer luck that I got transferred down here when I did.”

“Do you have any space suits we could use if we went there?” Hermione asked, and the man furrowed his brow in confusion.

“Suits?” the man asked. “Why would you need suits to visit Mars?”

“Wait, does Mars have a breathable atmosphere?” Rias asked, and the man blinked at her in confusion.

“Yeah,” he replied slowly. “Are you feeling alright?”

“So they terraformed the planet, built massive energy production facilities there, and then accidentally summoned demons who ripped it all apart,” Hermione surmised. “Are we really going to a demon-infested Mars on the faint hope there’s something left for us to take there?”

“I mean...look, if you’re unwilling, I understand because this is so far outside what we figured we were walking into here, but we’ve come this far,” Rias sighed, and the others looked away, contemplating the choice before them.

“Even if he has given up, I do still want to see if the Philosopher’s Stone can create an elixir capable of restoring my Papa,” Fleur said.

“We’ve managed to evade them so far,” Akeno murmured, “and the vast majority of them don’t seem to be able to fly, so we can probably just avoid them entirely.”

“It would be cool to walk on another planet that isn’t Earth of the Underworld,” Luna added.

“It’s not like we haven’t managed to kill the ones we’ve come across before,” Koneko shrugged.

“Mione?” Harry asked softly and she chuckled, shaking her head.

“For the record, my objection was more down to the seeming pointlessness of it than the danger,” Hermione replied. “Nicolas Flamel had it so much easier when he came here.”

“If you get the images from his mind, will you be able to teleport us over even though it’s on another planet?” Ciri asked.

“I’ve done it before, going back and forth between Earth and the Underworld,” Harry replied as he looked back at the scientist and searched through his mind more extensively. “Do you have any reason to suspect that there are any more samples of the non-synthetic energy on Earth?”

“I’d be shocked if there were,” the man replied and he sighed.

Taking a moment to wipe his memory, Harry and the others disappeared and quickly found an empty room to open a portal in, knowing that the facilities security would likely pick up on it again as it did last time. Just as they heard the robotic voice sound the alarm, they all stepped inside the circle and vanished, reappearing in a building that had clearly at one point looked much like the one they just left, but which now lay in ruin.

They whipped around at the sound of furious growling next to them and looked in shock at the three armed men who greeted them with instant hostility. They’d once been human, that much was clear, but the demons that killed them hadn’t stopped there. Their skin looked melted, pink, and sagging in places. Their eyes were white and yet clearly they could see, and as they raised their arms towards them, Harry realized, to his horror, that their guns had become fused into their flesh. He barely conjured a shield in time to stop the bullets, and Akeno took advantage of their distraction, flying up and blasting the three of them with yellow lightning that made them shriek.

“Zombies too?” Hermione asked. “What sort of horror movie have we stumbled into?”

“One that I’d like to leave as soon as we can,” Rias muttered, floating over to the end of the hallway they’d appeared in and checking to see if there were other demons nearby. “The coast is clear for now. How close to the storage room did you take us?”

“As close as I could,” Harry replied, scratching his head as he looked at the doorway in front of them, or what remained of it.

Half of the ceiling above had caved in there, crushing the door and blocking the path forward.

“Please tell me this isn’t the only way in,” Ciri muttered.

“It is and the bloke back there never saw the inside of the room so I can’t take us closer,” Harry muttered. “I can’t see past all this debris either.”

“We’ll have to destroy it, though if we just do that carelessly, it might cause a greater cave-in,” Akeno sighed.

“Focus on reinforcing the floor above,” Rias said. “Once this part of the building is structurally secure, I’ll destroy everything in our way.”

“Bloody hell, we actually are on Mars,” Hermione breathed as she looked out the one miraculously solid window next to them. The red, bone-dry terrain outside looked like every image of the planet she’d ever seen, “I wonder how they managed it.”

“I’m sure we’ll be able to find their documentation in the omnilibrary or the Room of Requirement if it turns out that our collection actually is incomplete,” Rias replied. “Kiba, Koneko, Ciri, I want you three guarding the hallway. The rest of us will work on making sure this dilapidated ruin doesn’t fall on our heads.”

“Sounds like a plan,” Kiba murmured as he and Koneko moved into position.

To say that the facility had seen better days would be an understatement. Even ignoring the bloodstains on the walls and floors and the scorch marks everywhere from fires that had clearly burned themselves out ages ago, it was clear that maintenance on the place had stopped long before the last man died. It was a miracle that it was standing at all, and once the peerage had finished cleaning up what they needed to to move around more easily, they started repairing the damaged walls and ceiling. They didn’t need to get it back in perfect shape to be able to safely clear the rubble, but they did need to make sure that it was structurally sound at least.

“I can see enough of the floor upstairs to teleport there,” Luna said as she floated along the ceiling and peered through the gaps in it. “I’ll check and make sure that it isn’t more dangerous than we think.”

“Be careful,” Harry said. “I don’t sense anything too close by, but then, we didn’t sense that strange one-eyed thing back in Phoenix.”

“Will do,” Luna nodded, casting a disillusionment charm on herself before teleporting upstairs.

“You’re on the second floor from the top, actually. The ceiling here caved in, causing everything below it to collapse, but if I just vanish the rest of the debris here, it should be safer to create a path to the storage room than we feared.”

“Do you see any indication that there was damage done to the room beyond this hallway?” Harry asked. *“Because if it’s in as bad of a shape, those energy cells might be toast.”*

“It seems to have been limited to the area I just cleared out,” Luna replied. *“I think something crashed through the ceiling here that...”*

She trailed off and appeared next to them a moment later. “I think we’re about to have company.”

“What did you see?” Rias asked but before Luna could reply Kiba’s panicked shout reached them.

“Guys, a little help here!” he called out, and Rias signaled for the rest of them to go see what was wrong.

“Here goes nothing,” the redhead muttered, pressing her hand against the large obstruction blocking their path and channeling her power into it. It was atomized a moment later, and she rushed inside while Harry and the others went off to see what was giving Kiba, Koneko, and Ciri trouble.

“Holy shit,” Akeno breathed as she took in the sight of the monster just as it backhanded Koneko across the hall, crashing into the far wall.

It was huge there was no other word for it, dwarfing even the robot they’d seen back on Earth. It was bipedal, its legs ending in cloven hooves, with bright red skin and a hulking physique that spoke to its immense strength. Its head was huge and monstrous, with two curved horns coming out of the sides of its head, large, razor-sharp yellow teeth, and green eyes that glowed with palpable malice. As Harry and Hermione went to check on Koneko, she raised her hands and unleashed the strongest bolt of lightning she could, hitting it right in the chest, only to freeze as it barely even staggered back at all.

“Look out!” Ciri warned, and they all barely managed to get out of the way as it unleashed a ball of green plasma that burned so hot they felt it anyway.

She had teleported behind him and slashed her blade at the back of its thighs, only to groan as she barely scratched it. The beast turned around and went to punch her, forcing her to teleport out as Kiba flew up and tried to stab at its throat. It caught his blade and grabbed him, squeezing until he cried out in pain. A sudden cone of cold at its crotch and fireball to its left shoulder made it roar, and it let go of Kiba, whom Fleur flew in and grabbed, taking him away alongside Luna just as Ciri teleported next to them.

“*Avada Kedavra!*” Harry hissed, hitting it center mass, only to freeze as it merely staggered back.

“That spell is meant to rip the soul out of a creature,” he thought to himself. *“Either these things don’t have souls, or they’re so tightly bound to their forms that the magic has no effect.”*

The beast roared at him, and Harry flew into the air, unleashing a barrage of every offensive spell he could think of. Blasting curses, gouging curses, fireballs, lightning bolts, and overpowered bludgeoning charms that would have turned elephants to mulch rained down on it, doing horrifyingly little damage. They did keep it occupied, though, forcing it to step back slowly as it furiously tried to find an opening for its counterattack.

Hermione, who had spent the whole time conjuring blocks of tungsten, transfigured them into bears and animated them to attack the beast, hoping to buy them time. Harry, seeing them coming, relented in his own assault, letting them distract it instead. As it roared in challenge and charged at

its new foes, he transfigured the walls, reshaping them to completely close off the area they were in. He didn't expect that to buy them much more time than Hermione's conjurations would, but he hoped that it would work just long enough to let Rias find what they were looking for or give him enough time to try himself.

"That thing's hide...is insane," Ciri muttered. "I could barely graze it."

"Same," Kiba said. "Koneko are you okay?"

"I might have cracked a rib or two, but otherwise..." Koneko muttered. "That is so much worse than the imp or those soldiers."

"*Harry, there are a bunch of things in here but I don't know what the hell I'm looking at,*" Rias projected across their bond. "*We should have switched places in hindsight.*"

"*We still can,*" Harry replied, flying down the hall. "*There's something here that even you might struggle to damage.*"

They passed each other in the hall, and Harry quickly entered the storage room, lighting it up with a wave of his hand and frantically looking around the power cells. By luck, it seemed to have suffered little damage, save for the heavily reinforced door that Rias had clearly melted a hole in to gain access, though as he heard the sound of metal being torn apart coming from down the hall, it became apparent that that was where their luck ended. Moving quickly, he started opening up every container he could find, hoping that one of them would contain the glowing orange spheres he'd seen in the scientist's mind.

"Oh, now I get it," Rias winced as the giant pinkish red monstrosity tore its way through the wall and blasted them with with a ball of green plasma.

She hit it directly with a ball of crimson destruction and smirked at the surprised look it gave her when she destroyed it.

"I'll keep this thing busy," Rias declared. "You all try to find ways to hurt it."

"It's insanely durable," Koneko warned as she flew right up to it.

It swiped its fist at her and she shielded herself with a wave of Destruction. It was a technique her mother had drilled into her extensively when she was younger and one she'd struggled with quite a bit, but she'd gotten it down eventually. She expected to see its fist simply atomize and was thus surprised when it managed to hit her away, hurling her into the wall. It roared in pain, looking down at its mangled fist, and tried to destroy the clearly dangerous foe next to it with another ball of plasma. Rias flew out of the way, winded but otherwise not too hurt, and it growled in frustration.

"I only destroyed its skin," the redhead breathed, genuinely shocked as she saw that, while she'd exposed the bones of its hand, she hadn't taken it clean off like she'd been trying to.

"**Now, Koneko!**" Ddraig roared, and she jumped forward, ducking under the beast's frustrated swing and punching it clean in the gut with her boosted gauntlet.

If it were a normal creature, her fist would have gone straight through it, enhanced as she was by the red dragon's power, and she groaned as she felt the reverberation go up her arm, feeling like she'd just tried to punch a tree as a baseline human. She didn't cause nearly the damage she wanted

to, yet she still hit it hard enough to send it flying back across the hallway and grinned as it slammed into the wall.

“See how you like it,” she muttered.

“We can actually hurt this thing, but we’d likely still be better off getting out of here,” Fleur said as she bathed it in fire and scowled at how little damage she actually did. ““Arry, hurry up!”

“Trying!” he shouted back as the beast jumped to its feet and screamed in rage.

“It’s worth a shot,” Hermione said as Luna raised her hand and Rias cocked an eyebrow at them.

“What is it?” she asked.

“Destroy that outer wall,” Hermione said, watching as conjured a stream of water, soaking the floor in front of it as it charged at them.

Realizing what they had in mind, the crimson-haired beauty blasted the wall with destructive energy, creating a hole big enough for the monster to fit through, and watched as Hermione transfigured the floor into a curved slide and Luna froze the water to ice. The monster looked almost comically shocked as it slipped and fell and was so taken aback that it didn’t manage to stop its descent in time to avoid being tossed out into the chasm below. It hurled one last ball of plasma at them, which Rias destroyed, before falling so far that it disappeared from view.

“Yeah, we can’t help this world,” Hermione panted, shaking her head. “I don’t think Sirzechs would have an easy time of this.”

“He’d have managed to destroy that thing, but against a whole army of them, I can’t say,” Rias sighed.

“I’ve got the energy cells,” Harry declared as he appeared, drawing all their attention. “There were only four viable ones left, and I swiped them all.”

“Only four left possibly in this whole universe,” Rias sighed. “Well, we’ll have to make them count.”

“We should only need one to create the Stone, provided we don’t fuck it up,” Koneko muttered.

“Now, let’s get the hell AHH!” Ciri screamed, and they all looked in horror as, before their eyes, it appeared like a sizable section of her abdomen just exploded outward.

They all watched in horror as blood started to spray out of her and she went prone, being dragged along by whatever had attacked her. Fleur flew right at her, grabbing at the air behind her and feeling the demon there.

“No!” Harry shouted, catching the ashen-haired beauty as she slumped forward into his arms.

“Die!” Fleur screamed, holding the struggling beast in the air. Its screams were deafening as she bathed it in fire, singing it to the bone until it finally went still in her arms.

“No, no, no, no,” Luna whimpered, sinking to her knees and trying to heal the gaping wound, only to go still as she saw Ciri’s ruined intestines start spilling out.

“Rias,” the otherworlder gurgled, looking desperately at the redhead, who was already pulling out her pouch of Evil Pieces. “Do...it.”

“You’re going to be alright,” Rias promised her, pulling out a knight just as Akeno and Koneko worked together to pull down the roof to block off the area they were in. “In hindsight, we really should have done that earlier.”

She would be assessing every moment of this adventure once they were safe and already suspected that she was going to find fault with quite a bit of how they’d handled things. She had some experience leading her peerage on missions of this nature but she was quickly starting to realize she’d never actually faced anything that was much of a threat to her before, and her prior successes had been more due to that than her own strategic abilities.

“Will that be enough?” Harry asked.

“On its own, almost certainly not, but I want to see if two knights will suffice,” Rias replied, pushing the first against Ciri’s chest.

It slipped inside with ease and started to glow and flash within her, indicating that it was insufficient, and she added a second one quickly. She had three of them, but no one had ever used three knights, rooks, or bishops before, and she hadn’t thought to ask Ajuka if that would work. If it failed, she could try rooks or just do as she’d initially figured she’d need to and use a queen, but the advantages of a knight would suit Ciri well, she knew, and it wasn’t as though she didn’t have a minute to experiment, shielded as they were just then from other demonic incursions for the moment.

Ciri gasped as she felt the knights change her, grasping her abdomen as it started to knit itself back together.

“Can you open a portal back home for us?” Luna asked, and she nodded, reaching out and focusing on Japan back on Earth.

A glowing green portal opened up a moment later, and it was the last thing she saw before she passed out.

“She’s fine,” Rias said as she picked the still-bleeding blonde up. “Let’s hurry through before this thing closes.”

Not wanting to spend another minute in that wretched universe, they all stood up and went to make their way through the portal, only to freeze in mortal terror as they felt a presence unlike anything they’d ever known. It was distant, horrifyingly so, given that they could feel it, and it dwarfed the power of even that giant monster they’d just sent hurtling out to the ground below. It felt like rage incarnate, hatred on a level none of them could even fathom, and it was far and away the most powerful thing they’d ever been anywhere near.

“I don’t think what we’re feeling is even on this planet, and we can sense it,” Akeno breathed. “Through the portal, now!”

They all flew as fast as they could, fearing that whatever was out there might teleport in and kill them all if they didn’t.

“Oh, thank the Lightbringer,” Rias breathed as she took in the familiar sight of the Japanese countryside and carefully set Ciri down.

Her injuries had almost healed, but she figured that it would be a little while before she woke again, something that she was entirely okay with.

“It turns out multiversal travel is very, very scary,” Luna muttered, sitting down and trying to calm her racing heart as Harry sat down next to her and wrapped an arm around her shoulder.

“Gnarl, we’re back,” Hermione said into her ring. “Gnarl?”

“Maybe that thing just doesn’t work,” Kiba murmured as he saw her furrow her brow in confusion.

“We tested it,” Hermione replied. “It didn’t connect while we were in that waking nightmare of a universe, but the idea of it letting us communicate between dimensions was always theoretical and unlikely. Back here, though, it should work, and the fact that it isn’t is frankly concerning. I’m going to...what the hell?”

“What is it?” Harry asked.

“I...I can’t teleport to Kuoh,” Hermione replied.

“What do you mean you can’t...what in the world?” Rias muttered as she tried and failed to reach the town that had been her home for years.

She tried to teleport to the underworld too and found that she couldn’t reach out to it either. For them to teleport required them to be able to clearly picture in their minds where they wanted to go before they opened a magic circle but in doing so, they reached out to the spot in question. She’d never failed to manage that before and hadn’t known what it would feel like, but as she attempted it there and got the distinct sense that she was trying to reach a place that didn’t exist, she was left wondering what had happened.

“Okay, this is bizarre,” Harry said as he teleported ten feet to his right. “I can still do that, so it’s not like the fight with that monster robbed us the ability, but I can’t reach out to Kuoh, the Underworld or Hogsmeade.”

“We’re not on our Earth,” Hermione breathed, and they all looked at her in shock, grimacing as they realized that she was almost certainly right.

“Ciri wasn’t exactly of sound mind when she opened up that portal,” Akeno sighed. “I guess we’re on an entirely different Earth...again.”

“Her stomach’s closed back up so she should be fine soon,” Luna said as she cleaned off the blood and ghosted her fingers over the other blonde’s abdomen. “It didn’t even scar.”

“I can’t say for sure that she’s going to wake up soon, though,” Rias murmured. “The Evil Pieces have taken, which is great, but this is the first time that they’ve ever been used on someone from her world with her elven blood, and I can’t say for sure that that won’t have any complications. I would have preferred to use them on her back in the Rookery, given that that would have been a more controlled environment, but...”

“C’est la vie?” Fleur murmured. “She is going to be alright, though, right?”

“She’s already healed and feels perfectly stable,” Rias replied. “I think we should find a nice hotel and just put her to bed for a while. We can monitor here there while a few of us look around and make sure that this world isn’t a death trap like the last one.”

With that, she flew up into the air to look around and quickly descended back down.

“We’re not far from what looks remarkably like Tokyo,” she declared.

“It is genuinely weird that there seem to be multiple Earths out there that all have the same continents and even settlements,” Hermione said. “We were so focused on getting samples of Argent Energy back there that I don’t think I really appreciated how bizarre it was that there was a Phoenix, Arizona, in a whole other Earth. There being a United States was weird enough on its own.”

“I have no idea, and frankly, I’m too tired to ponder it right now,” Fleur sighed. A moment later, she perked up and went, “I wonder if there is a Paris, France, here and, if so, how they differ!”

“Let’s get Ciri somewhere comfortable first and then we can buy an encyclopedia or something,” Harry chuckled, standing up and wrapping an arm around her and kissing her cheek.

With Rias still holding Ciri, they all made themselves invisible and flew off towards Tokyo.

“This is so weird,” Rias marveled a while later as they sat together at their table in the the bar of the hotel they’d chosen. “This tastes just like Sapporo.”

“It has flavor?” Harry teased as he sipped his own beer, and she slapped his shoulder. “I’m kidding. It’s lager; it’s not supposed to.”

Rias stuck her tongue out at him and took another sip. “It’s the same beer; it has the same name, and it is, obviously, made in the same place. How in the world can two universes have planets so absolutely similar to each other?”

“I have no idea,” Harry murmured, looking up as he saw Akeno walk in. He signaled that they had a silencing charm around the table, and she nodded, staying quiet until she sat down next to them.

“She’s resting well, and the others decided to stick around the room and watch after her,” she said. “Still pondering the great mystery?”

“Taste this and tell me it isn’t Sapporo,” Rias said, offering her glass, and Akeno took it, taking a sip and furrowing her brow in confusion.

“Don’t tell me it’s called that,” she said, and Rias nodded.

“This world is so much like ours it just doesn’t make sense,” she said. “There’s no Hogwarts, so presumably there are no wizards or witches, and there’s no Underworld, so we can guess there are no devils, but other than that...”

“It does seem genuinely boring, though given where we came from, that is not a bad thing,” Akeno sighed. “We’ve hunted some terrible things together but never anything like that.”

“We approached the whole thing poorly,” Rias scowled. “From the moment we went to Mars, I don’t think I made a single wise decision. I was just so hyperfocused on getting what we’d come for that I let that blind me to even basic strategy. I think we’ve also really gotten too used to being able to overpower our foes.”

“We’ll work on more tactical training once we get back,” Harry said, rubbing her shoulder and earning a smile. “The important thing is that we got out in piece, most of us, anyway.”

“Asia could have healed Ciri if she’d come but she’d have fainted back in Phoenix, untrained as she is,” Rias muttered. “She’s one of us now, and that’s fantastic, though I suspect it will be a long time before I want to try visiting any other universes again after we return home.”

“Do you want to go exploring?” Akeno asked. “This world seems so mundane that it shouldn’t be a problem, and the rest of them should be more than capable of protecting Ciri from any threats that might pop up while she rests.”

“I must say, I am really curious about how this Japan differs from ours,” Rias replied. “Once Harry and I are done our beers, we can get going.”

“Oh, don’t wait on my account,” Harry smiled before chugging what remained of his beer.

“Works for me,” Rias replied before following suit, which he found genuinely impressive.

Akeno led them out into the streets of Tokyo, and they set about exploring the city, quickly coming to one very interesting conclusion.

“The streets and buildings are all the same,” Rias murmured, shaking her head. “I don’t visit Tokyo as often as I do Kyoto, but I’ve been to this part of it within the last couple years, and this is exactly like what I remember.”

“So the city is in the same spot as the one in our world, has the same name and seems to be completely identical,” Akeno surmised. “What are the chances of that?”

“Negligible, I’d say,” Rias said. “I just don’t understand how any of this is possible.”

“We should check out the one part of Japan that we know for certain is different,” Harry replied.

“Kuoh,” Rias nodded.

“Yeah,” Harry replied. “Is it just empty land in this version of Japan, or is there a village there with a different enough layout that my knowledge of the place in our world wasn’t accurate enough for us to teleport there, and why was Kuoh, a tiny town that would be completely insignificant if your family and Sona’s didn’t have an interest in it, different in a way that Tokyo isn’t?”

“We’re stranded here until Ciri wakes up, and I can think of worse things we could do than try to answer this particular mystery,” Akeno murmured, and Rias nodded, taking a moment to fill the others in on what they were doing.

“Alright, let’s go,” the redhead said, and the other two nodded.

They quickly found an empty alleyway they could step into before making themselves invisible and flying up into the air. Still able to sense where the others were, they remained undetectable as they flew away around the city, taking in the basic layout of it before flying south to the Kanagawa Prefecture.

“Okay, this is where Kuoh should be,” Rias murmured as they landed in the middle of a forest. “The surrounding area looks the same, but...”

“It’s completely undeveloped,” Akeno said as she looked around, making herself visible again. “It’s not on the coast, so I can get that, but...it’s still weird that a spot this usable was just left empty. It’s not like Japan is overflowing with space for settlement.”

“It’s such a minor change in a country that is so otherwise just like the Japan of our world,” Rias murmured. “Why would this be the one big change between them?”

“I should check out the Highlands of Scotland before we leave,” Harry murmured. “I know that Hogsmeade doesn’t exist and Hogwarts wouldn’t either if it doesn’t. Is that area empty too or is there something else built in place of them?”

“Given how much less densely populated Scotland is than Japan, it being empty would be far more understandable,” Akeno said. “It’s definitely worth checking out, though, and...”

“Run!” they heard a frantic female voice shout, and they all winced.

“For fuck’s sake,” Rias muttered, glaring in the direction of the voice. “I have had quite enough excitement for today, thank you very much.”

“Whoever that is is clearly in trouble, and it’s almost certainly mundane trouble, so how hard would it be to lend them our ai...” Harry went to ask, only to go silent as they heard the distinct sound of a tree shattering.

“Perhaps this world isn’t quite as mundane as we thought,” Akeno grinned, and Rias sighed.

“Fine, let’s go see what’s going on,” the redhead sighed, and all three of them flew off in the direction of what was clearly quite the fight.

“All this fighting is making me so wet,” the girl they heard before sighed breathily as they drew close. “If you want to give up, I’ll understand, but I really hope you’re willing to let me beat you more.”

“*A girl after my own heart,*” Akeno thought to herself as she drew close enough to see who was speaking.

She was short and clearly not human, given the tiny horns sticking out of her head, the wings sticking out of her back, and the whip-like tail floating behind her as she stood, facing a pair of creatures so shrouded in shadow that they could barely make out what they were. Her long white hair flowed behind her, obscuring far more of her form than the skimpy black leather outfit she was wearing. Behind her another girl stood, only a little taller, with long red hair nearly the same shade as Rias’. She was watching the fight with the open desperation of someone whose well-being rested on its outcome, and she was so focused on it that she didn’t notice as a third shadowy figure emerged behind her.

“Oh, no you don’t,” Harry said, reaching out and grabbing the cowled figure by the ankle with a wave of his hand and dragging him away as he went to stab her.

“Ahh!” the girl screamed, whipping around and blasting the figure with a fireball. She looked at Harry, Rias, and Akeno in confusion, quickly realizing that they’d just saved her, and asked, “Who are you?”

All three of them stood in stunned silence at the sight of her with Akeno projecting across their bond, “*Um, did I take a blow to the head earlier that I forgot about, or does she look a lot like you, Rias?*”

“*She could be Milicas’ sister,*” Harry replied, noticing her pink eyes, just a shade lighter than Grayfia’s red ones.

“Who goes there?” the white-haired girl snarled, jumping over as she finished off the other two and regarding the three of them warily. “Stay back!”

“Maria, it’s okay!” the redhead exclaimed, grabbing the other girl’s arm. “They saved my life.”

“Really?” Maria asked, cocking her head at them curiously. “Why?”

“We happened to be in the area,” Rias replied dryly, and Maria looked at her, finally noticing what they already had.

“You look a lot like Mio,” she said slowly. “The name Wilbert doesn’t ring any bells, does it?”

“I can’t say I’ve ever met a Wilbert,” Rias replied, and Maria nodded.

“If I may, what the hell were those things?” Harry asked.

“You’re not wrong,” Maria chuckled humorlessly, stepping closer and looking up at him. “They’re...oh, my, an incubus!”

“What?” Mio asked as the three of them looked at her in shock.

“How did you know that?” Harry asked, and she looked at him strangely.

“Have you not noticed that I’m a succubus?” Maria asked, and his eyes went wide.

“You are?” Harry breathed as the other Rias and Akeno’s jaws dropped.

“It explains the tail, though I didn’t think you were actually devils,” the redhead replied.

“Have you never met a succubus before?” Maria asked, her eyes flashing with impish mirth.

“Never,” Harry replied.

“Well, then I guess you don’t know the proper custom for when an incubus and a succubus meet,” Maria grinned. “You and I must compete sexually until one manages to utterly dominate the other, leaving them a mindless wreck, utterly exhausted by pleasure!”

“What?!” the rest of them exclaimed in unison.