

Howdy all. This obviously won the Ranma poll for January. **FILFy** will be out for the Super Bowl (it's a big deal in the states, LOL, I know it doesn't register much beyond our borders, but very few of my fics would work for a Valentine's Day update) a HP update will drop by the end of January, thought it won't be edited by anyone beyond myself and Grammarly. Similarly, the next chapter of ATP will be posted by the end of the month, again edited solely by me, hence why it has taken so long.

This has been edited by me with Grammarly and **Hiryo**.

I will be posting this chapter at the end of the month over on fanfic. If you spot any mistakes please tell me, and I will correct them.

Chapter 20: Combatus Interruptus, Storm's Arrival

At the same time that Saeko and Shizuka had begun their underwater adventure, Rias, Rika and Asia had arrived at his temple to meet with Linfai Shinra. Linfai had prepared some tea for them, while Rias had made a point of bringing along small cookies and sweets, which was traditional when you were making a request of someone in that individual's house.

With Rika standing at the doorway watching and Asia sitting next to her at the traditional Japanese low table Rias had first explained how she and Asia had met. She had mentioned Asia before when she set up this meeting, but now she made it clear to the man that Asia was not part of Rias' peerage, for all that Rias had at one point hoped to convince Asia to join her, and that now, Rias had no plans to try and convince her to join.

Now, sipping his tea, the priest looked shrewdly at Asia, setting his cup down lightly before asking, "Well, I know that you are no devil yourself, young lady. If I did not trust Gremory-ojou's words, I would have been able to tell that when you walked into my temple."

"Just Rias, please, Honored Elder. I've recently made a concerted effort to get away from being treated as nobility," Rias interjected, then smiled faintly. "And I thought I saw a talisman over the doorframe behind us when we came in."

"You see well. And Lady is not just a title, Rias-ojou. It is used to denote a certain way of acting. And from our interactions thus far, you are worthy of it," Linfai said, his eyes twinkling for a moment as Rias found herself flushing a bit at the compliment. *Ha, while I've long since set aside worldly pleasures, it's nice to know that I've still got it in me to make a girl blush.*

He turned his attention back to Asia, humming thoughtfully as he went over the story Rias had told him of how the two young women had come to meet. "I also know and understand why you left the church in the first place, Asia-chan. However, I have to wonder how you reconcile your faith with being friends with a devil. How can you, a believer in Christ, sit next to a woman who is a devil, the very antithesis of everything that is good in your religion? Have you come to believe in your own probity over the tenants of your faith?"

Asia frowned a bit, but she had been prepared for this. Indeed, this was a question that Asia had asked herself a few times before Gabriel had shown up and she had seen how the Angel of the Message herself had acted while around other devils. *Gabriel-sama was a bit wary of them but certainly never acted or even spoke to Rias and the others like they were evil. And while Akeno and a few of the others can be naughty, I haven't seen any of them do anything I would call evil. Still, I understand this is about more than Rias and her peerage.*

Gripping her rosary, Asia smiled faintly, using the memory of Gabriel, her warmth and friendliness towards the devils to help muster her own thoughts on Devils as she pushed through her normal shyness to answer the elderly man's question. "In your religion, sir, is being born to a thief automatically making one a thief?"

"No. Being born into a family of thieves might lead one down that road, but it does not automatically color you with the same wickedness." Linfai smiled faintly. "I can see where you're going with this, but elaborate."

"Yet you say, 'Why should not the son suffer for the iniquity of the father?' When the son has done what is just and right and has been careful to observe all my statutes, he shall surely live. The soul who sins shall die. The son shall not suffer for the iniquity of the father, nor the father suffer for the iniquity of the son. The righteousness of the righteous shall be upon himself, and the wickedness of the wicked shall be upon himself." Asia quoted, smiling as if she took further strength from the words of the bible. "Many people think that the bible contradicts itself on this point when it says in Numbers that the Lord shall visit the iniquity of the fathers on the children to even the third generation, but they often miss the fact he says that about the guilty. About following generations who have themselves chosen to follow their parents into sin in some fashion, like a boy deciding to become a thief because that is what his parents did, knowing it was wrong but still doing so anyway."

With the memory of Gabriel in her mind and the words of the Holy book on her lips, Asia leaned over the table, looking into the older man's eyes earnestly. "Rias and her whole generation, indeed, as I understand it, several generations since the original Lucifer fell from Heaven and brought Lilith into being, were born devils. Being born is no sin," Asia stated firmly. "Being a devil only makes you lean towards being evil. It does not make you evil or force that choice." She smiled then, looking over at Rias happily. "Even devils have the greatest gift that our Lord bestowed upon his creations, that of free will."

Linfai's smile widened at that. *I do wonder how the rest of the church feels about that point, and I could say something about the so-called sin of hubris. But I will refrain. Something tells me that this young woman has more to base her thoughts on this score than her own understanding of the Bible. Besides, it's not like I've ever made a study of the thing.* Indeed, Linfai hadn't asked that question to get into a theological discussion. He rather thought that such would be very interesting, but that wasn't why these two were here, and as pleasant as it was to have such polite and gorgeous company (indeed, even the policewoman who had, upon

entering his house, promptly begun to pull out guns and stow them on her person in various places, was good-looking) Linfai knew they were here for a purpose.

"I think, dear child, that your faith might be more in the goodness of the universe than anything else. But I will say no further on that score. Your answer satisfies, and I would be happy to help you learn certain common spells and wards from the Onmyodo style so long as you actually do have a magical core. Let us start first with a small children's test which we give to youngsters of our clan when we are trying to determine if they have magical power." With that, Linfai held up a hand and began to instruct Asia in the small spell.

Moments later, Asia was happily bouncing a glowing ball of radiant light in her hand, almost giggling. "It feels fuzzy almost, like a bouncy ball mixed with the fur of a puppy!"

Rias had scooted away the moment that the light magic began to flicker in Asia's hand. But now, examining it closely, Rias' brows furrowed. The Light Magic in Asia's hands was a slightly darker shade than the Light Spears of angels or fallen she had seen firsthand during the battle of Kuoh. *And it isn't formed into an attack spell either, which is the second most important thing here. Yet the other is that I'm not feeling even a tingle of pain from it.*

Hesitantly, Rias held out her hand, bringing it closer to the light spell as Asia obligingly held it out towards her. Slowly, Rias touched forward, twitching a bit as her fingers pushed into the sphere of light, the spell having no physical substance to it as a Light Spear would have. She held her hand there for a few seconds, her fingertips inside the light spell, before shaking her head and pulling her hand away. "Odd. I thought that holy energy would be able to hurt me. I read a treatise on the subject at one point. It was honestly quite fascinating, but it boiled down to the fact that any deific magic would have in it a tint of anathema towards devils because of the blood of Lilith in our veins."

Actually, the treatise had sort of gone off on a tangent at that point. How dimensions were both like slats laid against one another, but also like wavelengths, with some dimensions further up or lower on the wavelength than one another. And that any dimension lower than a certain median would be considered anathema to the dimensions along the median, while those above that line would be seen as 'holy'. Lilith had, according to Ajuka, been 'constructed' by Lucifer from lower dimension stuff.

Shaking her head and dismissing thoughts on the origin of her race back into the depths of her mind, Rias came back to the here and now, smirking a bit. "Actually, it used about three or four paragraphs to see that same thing in far more detail. But I doubt any of you want to hear that."

"Please, no," Rika grumbled from behind them, staring at the light avidly as she spoke up for the first time since introducing herself to Linfai as Asia's bodyguard. "Is that something anyone could learn to use? I mean, I'm not exactly a big believer in any deity, but if I can use magic, sign me up. I'll go through whatever ceremony or sanctification I need to."

“It doesn’t quite work like that, I’m afraid,” Linfai said with a chuckle. “One cannot make one believe if they do not already. It is entirely a matter of faith. Although, as with young Asia, faith in what is in question.”

“And unfortunately, Rika, Sacred Gear users have often been discovered to have magical cores simply because of the impact having a Sacred Geared has on their souls. They’ll always have specialties, but nothing that can’t be overcome through training,” Rias added, moving away from the light spell for a moment. “Does this mean that you will be able to teach Asia how to use your talismans and wards?”

“Well, perhaps,” Linfai mused, tugging at his long beard. “That spell is based around general faith in a higher power rather than a belief in any one of the Shinto deities. Thus, Asia was able to use it. Still, there are several wards and so forth that are similar, based more on the concept of keeping the mystical away based on the individual’s power rather than calling on a deity to empower them. We will need to test those to see if Asia’s faith is far-reaching enough to use them, though honestly, it’s doubtful. Still, that would certainly close many doors in terms of what I can teach her. Nor do I think I am able to, or willing, I will add, teach her our family’s specialized magic,” he warned.

“I’m not asking for that. I’m much more interested in your wards and talismans, the same kind of things you sell to the Astaroth Clan,” Rias said, smirking just a bit. “Turning those talismans into offensive spells is something my queen and I can see to in the future for Asia-chan.”

“Hmm... well, let us move on to another little test. Then, if Asia succeeds, we can speak about what manner of payment for such a service I will require. While we give the local demon clan a yearly tithe of nearly a thousand assorted talismans, that doesn’t mean I won’t charge you for breaking that monopoly. I might not like the Astaroth clan overmuch, but neither do I have a particularly soft spot for you, Rias-ojou.”

The twinkle in Linfai’s eyes showed that last statement for the lie it was, but Rias doubted that Linfai enjoying Rias’ manners and appearance would stop him from driving a hard bargain.

The next few tests Linfai wanted to run took a while and devolved at one point into whether or not the various Shinto deities could simply be called different aspects of the Lord. Asia pointed out specific parts of the Bible that spoke of the Holy Father having some of the powers of the various Shinto faiths, although Asia’s argument rapidly fell apart when Linfai brought up specific stories about the various gods. Some of them were so silly that Asia simply could not see even an aspect of God acting in such a way.

Regardless, it was clear that however she tried, Asia’s Faith in the Holy Father could not be used to power a few pre-prepped kotodama. Linfai walked Asia through the process of pushing her magic out into the talisman, what she had to be thinking of at the same time, but it

didn't work for any of the deific specific talismans such as for luck, for educational prowess, and so forth, the kind of kotodama that hung on the trees lining the pathway outside.

"So, that is a no on Amaterasu as well as Inari and Ninigi-no-Mikoto. That leaves only Hachiman and Fujin, and given your basic personality, dear, I doubt that I need to test those." Linfai chuckled wryly. "Well, that has at least told us that no, your Faith, no matter how personal it might be, cannot shift to encompass the idea of believing in any of the Shinto gods, even if you try to think of them as mere aspects of your Holy Father."

Asia pouted a bit at that but perked up as Linfai continued. "So let us continue to the more esoteric and personalized sort of kotodama. These talismans will take more magic out of you, dear, as you aren't powering them from your faith, but that should not matter overmuch..."

OOOOOOO

Diodora stared along the line of trees that led to the temple where Asia and Rias apparently were, the remainder of his peerage behind him. While he had been in Hakata before, this was the first time he'd been anywhere near this temple, and he found that the feel of this place bothered him. *I know that my great-grandfather had his reasons, but letting the Shinra clan maintain this temple within our territory was a mistake. We should have moved against them the moment we took over and tortured them for their secrets.*

It was not as bad as having a church in their territory would have been. No devil would be willing to have territory that included a true, sanctified and well-maintained church. Thankfully, whatever powers Japanese deities had did not imbue their followers with energy like that. Their magic was not 'holy,' in terms of being anathema to devils or what Christians thought of as sinners. For low to mid-tier devils, being struck by that type of magic was like having your soul seared, and even higher-level devils if the fallen angel or angel wielding it was anywhere close to parity.

Yet still, it was 'holy' energy in terms of coming from faith in a deity rather than an actual source of magic. *I seem to remember reading a paper from my never-to-be sufficiently damned cousin on that point and why it would still be dangerous for devils to underestimate even if the offensive power was lessened.*

For a moment, Diodora's annoyance at this place being within the t Beelzebub Clan's territory mingled with his familiar fear, anger and jealousy towards Azazel before he pushed those emotions away with the ease of a lifetime of disassembly. Diodora had always resented the fact that he would never be able to match Ajuka's abilities or achievements but now was not the time to pick at that old scab.

I suppose that access to talismans and wards based on the Japanese style was a good deal at the time, as I know that they are quite esoteric and diverse. Indeed, I remember that there are several talismans scattered around our estate, and an outer ward line based on the

Onmyodo style. But it has certainly bitten me in the rear now. I can't even sense any magic usage beyond the outer ward and even that with difficulty.

This was the same outer ward that Rias had run into when she first visited the two temples in the city. Both outer wards were based on the concept of Ma, a Shinto-style ward based on the concept of 'silence,' or a sudden cessation. Like a space in a story or a band of black on a decorative item, the 'silence' broke up the scene but, in doing so, brought more attention to what had gone before and after. In terms of magic, the ward acted almost like a dimensional bubble, blocking anyone from outside to whatever was going on inside. It wasn't perfect, of course, as Diodora could still see up the hill towards the temple. Yet he could not sense magically anything within.

"Stay behind me for now. We will spread out when we reach the temple," Diodora ordered.

Still scowling, Diodora marched forward, along the path towards the temple entrance, with his remaining peerage behind him. Diodora's first thought had been to simply fly into the temple, maybe even outright attack the place from the air, but even a devil such as he was more susceptible to enemy attack in the air than on the ground. *I know enough about kotodama to be wary of what the Shinra clan has come up with to defend this place, and if I attack first, I will be forced to contend with the Power of Destruction. Rias Gremory might be a useless childish cunt who got by relying on her big brother doting on her, but she still inherited the Bael Clan's Power of Destruction from her mother.*

Soon, he and his harem had pushed through that first ward that ringed the temple a few yards into the temple's property. Yet when Diodora and his party reached the halfway mark along the footpath towards the temple, they ran into a second ward that had been hidden from Diodora's sight right up until the moment he crashed headlong into it.

This was the ward that Rias had found as she walked through the semi-wild feeling 'forest' around the temple beyond the two sets of trees set at intervals around the path. This ward was built into the umebozu statues partially buried around the property. This ward was very much built to ward off nonhumans, and while Linfai Shinra had deactivated the ward to allow Rias to enter earlier that day alongside Rika and Asia, he had not left it so deactivated afterward.

"ARGH!" Diodora groaned, twitching away, feeling much like a normal person would have if he had stepped on a live wire or something similar. Blinking the pain away, Diodora found himself completely turned around, staring into the faces of his remaining peerage members. "What... I was..."

Growling, Diodora turned around, thinking perhaps that the pain of hitting that ward had caused him to turn in place. Yet when he took a step forward, he found himself back looking

at his now confused peerage members. "What? Is it shifting me somehow? You..." He pointed at his rook, gesturing her forward. "Walk towards that house."

Watching the woman go, Diodora waited, watching her hit that second ward. Just like Diodora, Augusti Alivero felt pain, although surprisingly, it didn't seem to be as much as Diodora had. Yet even as Augusti winced, her feet were no longer taking her forward toward the temple, but back towards them. She blinked, tried to turn around again while remaining in place and couldn't. Instead, she did a full three-sixty that frankly looked a little silly with one foot in the air as if she was a ballerina doing a pirouette until she was pointed back the way they'd come.

"Hmmm... some kind of mental attack, then? That initial burst of pain must have been from whatever it was infecting our minds. Is this what our family records meant, when they said that Japanese wards could be insidious? There are very few magics among the Three Factions that impact the mind so directly beyond memory erasure spells," Diodora mused before he sneered. "Regardless, you will not stop me! I will have a new nun to add to my collection before the day is out!"

Letting thoughts of breaking Asia to his will fuel his resolve, Diodora flared his demonic aura, creating a passive shield around himself against foreign magic.

This was Diodora's normal aura, fueled by his own demonic magical power rather than the power he had been given from his benefactor. Diodora knew very well that using that power should only be done in life-or-death situations. Still, Diodora knew it would be sufficient against any kind of subtle mental-based ward.

However, when Diodora slammed into the ward again, instead of bursting through, the shock was even more than before. When he tried to step forward, he found himself not just back facing into his peerage but well past them, almost back out of the temple's property and into the area around it. Windmilling his arms a bit between one step to the next, he turned, glaring at his peerage, his face promising retribution for even a single snicker or smirk.

None of them showed any sign of being amused by his predicament, instead bowing their heads quickly, their will having been long since broken by Diodora and his tender mercies. And thankfully, no passersby around the temple were in a position to see Diodora's humiliation.

Taking a deep breath, Diodora reined in his temper, speaking as if he had meant to do that. "So, the ward does indeed mess with your brain. I thought I had taken a single step, but now I am here. What did you all see?"

Gea, his queen, hesitantly stated that they had seen him twist around and march back through their group, his face focused and furious, as it had been when he walked into the ward. "And you didn't seem as if you heard us tell you that you were going the wrong way either, Master."

"A most insidious ward indeed! I didn't even register your words," Diodora mused, scowling. "Why was it more powerful the second time? Does it somehow bounce my own power back into me to power the ward's effect on my mind? Ingenious and worrisome."

That was actually only half of the reason why Diodora had found himself nearly back out of the temple's territory on his second attempt to pass the ward. The other half was because his mind had been filled with thoughts of what he wanted to do to Asia and how he wanted to treat her.

Many kotodama dealt with the banishment or warding against what the writer defined as evil. Mostly evil spirits, admittedly, but even there, Diodora, as a nonhuman, would have fallen under their purview regardless. And if there was one underlying principle of what could be determined to be evil, it might be doing something painful to someone else against their will for your own reasons. Treating them as if they were lesser than you were, as if another thinking, caring individual was a thing rather than a person.

Scowling angrily, Diodora ordered two of his peerage members to move forward again at an angle that would carry them off the footpath and into the woods but still forward towards the temple. He watched and frowned as she only took a single stumbling step backward before rounding and looking down at herself, her face scrunched up in pain as if she'd just stubbed her toes. Still, that gave him an idea of where the ward was. "So, it might be set up in a full circle around the temple. Still, regardless of how different our magical styles are, though, some things are universal. Spread out. There must be some border stones around here creating this ward."

This took at least ten minutes, as none of Diodora's peerage was all that good at using their magical senses like that. Diodora could probably have done it himself, but he remained where he was, glaring at the temple with his arms crossed. Eventually, though, Gea came back, informing him that she had found one of the ward stones. Skirting around the temple complex to one side within a copse of trees, he found the small head of the buried statue there, ironically the same stone that Rias had first discovered when she visited this temple.

With a snarl, Diodora lashed out with a bolt of magical energy, causing the buried statue to explode. Instantly, Diodora could feel the ward collapse. Much like a web, if you destroyed one such stone, the whole thing would collapse. His snarl turning into a smirk, Diodora stalked forward. "Now, let us be about this! Asia will pay for making me go through all this trouble, on top of nearly killing myself to trick the church into excommunicating her, as I had to back in Rome. I have been looking forward to this for months and I intend to savor it."

Those words caused many a shiver among his three remaining followers, but not one of them paused in their stride hurrying after him. They knew that if they did not retrieve Asia, it would be they who paid the price rather than the younger girl. And although they had also been holy maidens at one point, any empathy towards their younger fellow had long since been burned out of them. Indeed, at this point, all of them shared a single thought: *Better her than me.*

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Teaching Asia a few simple talismans had taken a while as the writing of every single line in a talisman had to be precise, and while she had been going to school in Kuoh for several months, Asia's calligraphy really wasn't all that good. However, eventually, a simple talisman was finished to the elderly priest's satisfaction.

However, before Asia could complete this similar step, they were interrupted. Rias looked up and towards the wall of the small tearoom as a blast of magic went off nearby. The noise of it reached the group a second later, and Rika quickly pulled her shotgun over her shoulder. This was an M26 Mass shotgun with a box magazine of five rounds, which she had in parts in her duffel bag when they arrived and had taken some time to put together while Rias had been explaining how she had come to be friends with Asia in greater detail than the day before. She'd been getting some very strange side eyes from the other two junior priests, young men who Rias had no idea were around the place before she arrived today, yet had ignored them.

Now, she was very glad she had brought the gun along. Unfortunately, it wasn't built from bits of the consecrated guns that the SAT had been given to play with. However, like the sniper rifle she'd used to come to Saeko, Mousse and Asia's rescue the day before, the shotgun would at least cause impact damage. It also could be loaded with specialized rounds, many of which Rika had picked up along with the gun itself the day before from the local police armory. She still had two exorcist-style guns in reserve, though.

For his part, Linfai sighed faintly. "And here I thought that whoever is out there would've been polite enough to take the hint when they walked into the second ward. I am afraid I must deal with a rather rude guest, ladies. If you will excuse me."

With that, he stood up, but Rias followed him alongside Asia. "Actually, I don't believe in coincidences, and I firmly think that this individual is here for us or rather, here for Asia. Asia, Rika and several of our friends had a run-in the other day with several devil-type attackers while I was meeting with you. And while the Astaroth heir had put on a show to make it seem as if they had nothing to do with that, well, they are devils, if I say so myself.

At the doorway, the same two young priests appeared, bowing their heads towards the old man but saying nothing. Linfai snorted at that, but he made no protest when Rias and Asia fell in line with his priests, heading outside. "Stay here, Asia. You're not a fighter, and if you show up, if we're right about what's going on, you'll just be a target for whoever is over there."

Asia flinched at that but held firm. "I promise to stay behind everyone else, but if anyone's hurt, I want to be there."

“Then stay inside the doorway. Retreat inside if anything violent occurs, and maybe practice your calligraphy while you wait,” Linfai suggested with a dry chuckle, taking a bundle of talismans from one of his younger fellows.

Outside, they found Diodora seemingly standing alone. To one side of him, Mousse was watching events hiding among the trees, a bare glimpse of white the only hint he was there, as if the duck had become a ninja.

Honestly, Rias was happy to see he hadn’t already attacked the locals. Not only would he have been badly outnumbered and outgunned, but it would have painted Rias and her group as the bad guys.

I know he’s there, and I’d be hard-pressed to sense any magic inside him. Whereas I can tell that there’s a magical field behind Diodora. He’s trying to be all mysterious and dramatic, Rias mused to herself before locking eyes with the Astaroth heir. “Diodora, do you have some business with me? If so, why wouldn’t you simply call to make an appointment?”

“Hakata is my family’s territory, including your temple. I do not make appointments with other people. Other people make appointments with me,” Diodora answered firmly. He then spotted Asia hiding behind the others and smiled, bowing his head towards her. “And my business today is not with you, Rias Gremory. I am here to speak to Asia-chan.” He was not asking permission, simply stating a fact, and his next words confirmed this. “After all, Asia-chan is not one of your peerage. I believe that someone should correct that mistake.”

“Oh, thank goodness. I’m so glad you’re not trying to act like the wronged party any longer,” Rias said dryly. “It didn’t really work with us yesterday or did you really think that we were fooled by your act the other day?”

At those words, Diodora scowled, but with a click of his fingers, the wide illusion behind him collapsed, and the rest of his peerage appeared, making the watching Mousse’s eyes narrow and Rika scowl. Both of them recognized all but one of the girls from the attack that Rika had helped to foil on Asia the day before down at the beach, and the one that hadn’t been there was the one who had helped Diodora go around and erase people’s memories the day before of that assault.

Instantly, Rika raised her rifle, pointing it at Gea. “Now, I know what you’re wondering. This gun doesn’t look anything like the weapons exorcists use, and it doesn’t look as if it is anywhere near the power of a sniper rifle. So it won’t be able to do simple impact damage like I did to you lot last night. To that I say, do you feel lucky, punks? Well, do ya? Because there are so many things that I can do with bullets.”

“Far be it for me to interrupt a woman when she is performing a, in my opinion, somewhat mangled one-liner, but I am the master of this temple, Heir Astaroth. Your family might have made agreements with my clan to let us remain here after you took over the

supernatural side of this city. That fact has not changed. Rias-ojou, Minami-san and Argento-san are my guests. I will not give them up to you. If you wish, you may wait until they leave. But attempt to take them from temple grounds, I will have no choice but to fight you."

"I am indeed Heir to my clan, and if you do not give up that which I desire to me, then I am fully prepared to void the agreement between our clans," Diodora warned Linfai. "Give over, old man, and you might live another day. I'd hate to see one of my family's most lucrative sources of revenue be cut down."

"Ah, that was actually a quite threat," Linfai mused. "A solid eight out of ten for the use of the double entendre there. Allow me to respond."

Linfai reached inside the neckline of his priestly robes to touch a talisman that had been sewn into the inside of his robe as his two fellows spread to either side along the low veranda at the front of the temple. A moment later, all three priests were wearing battle robes, longer, flowing robes that gleamed almost as if they were metal while light yellow spheres appeared around them, floating as if they were ready to intercept spellfire.

At the same time, two blue-skinned monsters appeared one to either side of the younger heir of priests. They were very obviously not living creatures. Living creatures did not look like caricatures, caricatures moreover that looked as if they had been drawn by a child's hand, a simple 2-D image given 3-D proportions and just looking worse for it. Yet they were certainly large and might have been somewhat intimidating to most.

"If you think you can simply barge in here and make demands, you had best think again," Linfai stated firmly.

While the rest of his stiffened behind him, Diodora ignored Linfai, staring at Rias. To the devils and Rika, the strange oni simply looked like mobile shields for the priests, useful but not a game changer. Similarly, he'd never seen any evidence that the talismans and minor magics of the Shinra clan were anything to be concerned about in a direct physical conflict. Only Rias' Power of Destruction was something to be truly concerned about.

"Rias Gremory, as Heir Astaroth, I am telling you to stand aside and let me recruit Asia Argento, the former Holy Maiden of the Church, into my peerage. You are in my territory. You're a guest here, and while I know that you are no longer the heiress of your house, any trouble here will reflect badly on both your clan and your brother, Maou Lucifer. Given his recent push to formally end the war between the three factions and begin true peace talks with them rather than simply let the current nonaggression continue, I don't think your brother can deal with any further trouble for many of the Pillar Clans."

Diodora smiled thinly, moving on from pointing out the political ramifications of a fight between them to try to appeal to Rias' general devil attitude. *All the information I know about Rias says she's lazy and non-combative. That Ranma fellow was very different, but Rias is no*

fighter. She didn't even gather her own peerage, for goodness sake! Her brother did it for her.
"Besides, as I said, Asia is not a member of your peerage. While you are her friend, that is where it ends. You are under no obligation to---"

"AHahahah!" Rias laughed, interrupting him by shaking her head. "I don't care about the political repercussions. You're right, I'm not the heiress to my family any longer and I am so done with caring about that kind of shit!" *Frankly, I'm done with caring about politics or anything my parents might've cared about at any point.* "And Asia is my friend. If I'm not willing to fight a pervert off for my friend, what kind of friend am I?" Chuckling again, Rias smirked. "Besides, I've been wanting to punch your face in since the moment I met you."

Scowling furiously, Diodora lashed out with a set of spells he'd prepared mentally. With his other hand, he waved towards his peerage, activating a hypnotic command within their minds that he had implanted in them that morning. Whatever physical or mental limitations they had disappeared in an instant. They would push their bodies as hard and fast as they could, ignoring their muscles, aching their hearts pounding beyond endurance. Even pain would not matter to them now. They would keep moving and keep using even broken limbs unless the limb in question simply could not respond any longer.

With Gea in the lead, the three women rocketed forward faster than Rika had anticipated, dodging her instant fire toward them. The first round, a small explosive round, slammed into the stone of the walkway, detonating on impact.

At the same time, Diodora himself teleported forward, closing the distance, then lashing out with several attacks that looked like magical blades of green and purple energy. Several dissipated, while kotodama on a few nearby trees flared into ash. This let only a few of Diodora's initial attacks get through.

Rias was the only one of the defenders to be able to react in time, and Diodora was forced to duck and roll away from a blast of Power of Destruction, then yelped as Rias charged forward, lashing out with a kick towards his neck that instead caught him on the collarbone with punishing force, sending him staggering backwards. *Where in the world did that come from! Nothing in my file on Rias has anything about her being a hand-to-hand fighter!*

Even with that abrupt stop of his own attack, he had things easier than his peerage. Some of the talismans held in the trio of priest hands connected to already prepared wards in the area. Some of them were so old that even Linfai didn't know what they did despite having access to the temple's records.

Augusti stepped into a ward that practically crushed her to her knees. That particular ward was based on purity, purity of body, rather than anything else, and given how much Diodora had abused her and the other girls of his peerage, regardless of whether or not it'd been against her will, that was perhaps the worst ward she could run into. Augusti screamed as her knees slammed into the ground before forcing herself to one side and out of the warded

territory, pushing all of her strength into the move even as her bones and muscles groaned in protest, unable to feel them.

Meanwhile, Mousse came in on the attack from the side, lashing out at the attackers with more than a dozen small daggers from underneath his wings, quacking loudly. Both Gea and the woman who could turn into metal were struck, and Gea hissed as the daggers sliced into their flesh, the weapons in her hands suddenly became red-hot as she stepped on another ward, this one apparently meant to banish weapons. Ignoring the pain, she held on to them, but the edges started to melt, forcing her to toss them away.

Unfortunately, at the same time Diodora's peerages were running into trouble with the wards, Rias also found herself in trouble. She had leaped away from one of Diodora's attacks, only to land directly on a tile in the walkway that had itself been warded. This one might have been done in some ancient past by a particularly stern monk... or a young Shinra child with a prankster's bent wanting to experiment.

The why of it didn't matter because one second and the next, Rias screamed in shock and anger as something began to constrict around her chest, pressing inward, the ward trying to banish or defend against her chest. "YOW, that stings! Ghaaa!" She stumbled sideways, nearly eating a spell to the face from Diodora. She rolled away, the feeling still following her for several seconds.

"Hah! At least whoever set up that particular ward understood that true beauty has nothing to do with those ridiculous udders of yours, Gremory." Diodora couldn't have stopped himself from taunting his opponent if he had wanted to and very much did not want to. With all the acting he had to put on for his clan and the rest of the underworld all the time, it felt liberating to let loose, despite his earlier efforts to talk the Gremory girl into walking away. Diodora lashed out with several more attack spells, teleporting short distances from place to place to throw off the defenders, cackling all the while.

As Rias scrambled to one side, lashing out with the Power of Destruction being at ankle height that caused Diodora to nearly lose his foot as the wide-angle attack nearly clipped him despite his teleporting around, she reflected on what little she knew about the Astaroth heir. He was known as a jack-of-all-trades but master of none, although it was not said in any kind of derogatory manner from what she could remember. Diodora was good at short range teleportation, which she had already seen this fight, and was able to form his Devil-given magical core into spells to attack and defend with equal ease. He was even known to dabble in mental type spells beyond the normal memory erasure type that any devil, fallen or even angel could use.

Judging by the way his peerage is moving so fast and not reacting at all to their injuries, that seems to be accurate, too. Diodora wasn't known as a powerhouse and had never been known to perform in ratings games. So he probably lacks real-world experience, just like I would have been if not for both training with Ranma, and the fight against Kokabiel and his Legion.

Maybe I can force him into a trap? Rias thought as she pushed herself to her feet, lashing out again with wide-angle curving blasts of Power of Destruction, which looked almost like she was launching crescent moon-shaped blasts in every direction, forcing Diodora to keep teleporting. *Either that or wear him out.* “Linfai, is there any way for us to tell where the wards are?!”

In asking that question, Rias also showed her inexperience and the old priest did not respond, instead creating a shield that blocked an incoming blast from Diodora and one of his peerage members. In doing so, Gea had opened herself up to an attack from the flying duck, Mousse’s curled daggers slamming into her cheek and stepping straight through.

She flinched, as anyone would when hit in the face but kept on fighting as if the pain of the injury did nothing, turning and lashing out towards Mousse in mid-air, only to watch him folding his wings and duck down below it. He landed and instantly began to quack, then was blown upwards and away from another ward, which apparently simply rejected everything on top of it. None of the enemies were in any position to turn their attention towards him, since Diodora had just stepped on another defensive talisman, which caused him to scream in agony.

“Ah, yes, that is one ward that I think young Asia might well be able to utilize. It essentially is a rejection of any and all perverted thoughts and will cause anyone who has such thoughts, as defined by the creator, intense pain. The more perverted, the more pain,” Linfai mused, his tone showing none of the strain of the battle up to this point. Considering all he’d been doing was standing where he’d begun and flinging out talismans occasionally, that made some sense. “As to your earlier question, Rias-ojou, I really don’t think that shouting out that information right now in the middle of a fight is a good idea.”

Staggering out of the ward area just in time to avoid another Power of Destruction beam, Diodora was just barely fast enough to raise a shield in front of himself before another blast of Power of Destruction slammed into it. He stared aghast at the shield, as the Power of Destruction literally seemed to eat into it second by second, even as he poured more firepower into it, his rattled, pain-filled thoughts unable to think of teleporting away for a second. He was just barely able to roll to the side as the shield spell finally gave way, the Power of Destruction having eaten through it despite how much power he’d poured into the spell.

And Rias smirked, moving over to stand back in front of the temple, her aura flaring out from her, a pinpoint Power of Destruction beam slamming into and through one of his peerage members, slaying Augusti even as she tried to close in with Rika, while both of the younger monks took turns blocking the incoming attacks from Gea, and the metal woman tore through the blue monsters. “You’re right on all counts, and I apologize. Although, I think they’re doing well enough to give us a distinct edge here. Heir Astaroth I think now would be to think about retreating.”

“Tools are meant to be sacrificed,” Diodora said, pushing himself to his feet as he gestured to either side with his hands, summoning up dozens then hundreds of small blue-purple and reddish needles of magical energy. Despite the near brush with the Power of

Destruction, Diodora was certain he could win this, and was now blinded by rage and a goodly amount of frustration. "And if you think you have a chance, you had best think again!" With that, he launched the needles forward, watching as they slammed into hastily erected shields from Rias and the two younger priests, while Rika and Linfai tried to go on the offensive, the metal woman tried to close, and Gea attempted to neutralize the flying duck keeping it from trying to flank Diodora or attack him from behind.

Yet the majority of the needles were sent all around the temple area into trees, at the ground and even into the temple's walls away from the shields of its defenders. Striking down, the needles remained corporeal just enough to trigger several more of the older, buried and forgotten wards, removing them from the equation. "I will have Asia Argento, and if I have to kill all of you to get her, so be it!"

OOOOOOO

Ranma and Vali were quiet as they moved zipped through the trees of a national park near Hakata, moving faster than any normal person could have run on a clear track, putting as much distance as they could between themselves and the edge of the national park. Neither of them was willing to let any civilians get hurt, and while it was midday, there were still a few hikers near the entrance into the forest.

As they rushed through the trees, Vali had to smile faintly. Japan was a very odd place, with so many national parks, but it was mostly because those areas were up mountainsides, historical in some fashion or simply places where farming would've been impossible. Thus, it made it kind of easy for the two of them to figure out where to go after they left Hakata.

Although admittedly, Vali, as a devil, he had been adopted by the head of the Grigori, could have stayed in the city and set up a dimensional bubble that would have kept the conflicts hidden and made it impossible for that fight to affect the world around them. Yet there was a problem with that above and beyond his lack of desire to fight in a cityscape. One, he was not going to share with his opponent or anyone else already not in the know.

That reason was tied to the fact that phone calls did not go across dimensional barriers. There had been numerous tests, and even the Devil Net, Ajuka Astaroth's finest creation, could not cross the barrier of a dimensional bubble, let alone from Earth to the Underworld. It was why devils went to such pains to create teleport arrays to connect between the two worlds.

The reason this was a problem for Vali specifically was that he had to not only be able to hear any instructions from his secret backer but also needed to stay in contact with his adopted father, much to his annoyance. Of course, this had nothing to do with Azazel treating Vali like a child. He'd always been clear on letting Vali go his own way as much as possible from a very early age. No, this was a punishment...

Flashback:

"I'm sorry. Could you repeat that?" Vali said, his face entirely deadpan, as he slowly set his cup ramen down to stare at his adopted father. He just handed over his phone and the man had been typing into it.

Considering that Vali had two cell phones, one of which was the one Azazel had given him, and the other one which he had been given by the Khaos Brigade, which was not here currently, there wasn't anything on that phone incriminating. Now though, Vali was having second thoughts about having handed it over so easily.

"It's pretty simple, brat. After what happened in Kuoh, I want to keep an eye on you. Well, I don't. Our public relations department does."

"Public relations department? We have a public relations... You're talking about Shemhazai, aren't you? He's your chief diplomat, not... never mind," Vali groaned. "I thought you all had been able to smooth things over with the Devil Faction."

"For the most part, we were. Sirzechs wants peace between the Three Factions as much as I do. However, the fact you seemed almost willing to throw down with both Gabriel and Leviathan, well it brought up a lot of questions about your sanity from both Sirzechs and the Church's rep. They want me to keep a closer eye on you." Azazel snickered. "Hell, I had questions about your sanity when you reported back. Not only reporting both of those in the same place and fighting on the same side, but then, oh, how did you put it? 'I would've fought either one of them on my own, but they were willing to gang up on me.' Damn, kid, I know you've got big brass ones, but even Sirzechs, who is a fucking monster, wouldn't want to take both of those ladies on at the same time. Nor would I."

Azazel snickered for a moment, his eyes glazing over and his hands making squeezing motions. "Well, unless in bed anyway. Damn me, that would for sure be an experience. All the mock-innocence of Serafall and then the true innocence of Gabriel and those tits of theirs, oooh!"

Vali rolled his eyes, tempted to fling his chopsticks at the man, but as there were still a few noodles remaining in his ramen, he refrained. "And you just gave in to their demands?"

"Kid, it was all I could do to convince Shemi that I didn't need to put a collar on you!" Azazel sighed, becoming a little serious for a moment. "We both underestimated how much your attempting to interfere in Kuoh to retrieve Kokabiel would cost us on the political level. If you'd been able to arrive earlier, maybe while the battle was still going on and taken the ass out early, it wouldn't have been so bad. But as it is..."

"But Gabriel was the one who beheaded Kokabiel!" Vali protested. "I admit that Kuoh isn't our territory, but it wasn't the Church's either. Surely, the church and the devils are having just as much trouble about that? Heck, we could be protesting her..."

“No, it doesn’t quite work like that. For one thing, Gabriel had apparently checked in with the local devils upon her arrival,” wagging the phone in the air with one hand, Azazel counted off points on the fingers of his other hand. “Gabriel was a welcome guest by the time the battle started. Two, she was there during the battle and offered her services to help defend Kuoh against Kokabiel’s assault. And three, the local devil heiresses both agreed that she should be the one to deal out punishment. So that is a very different thing than you going in and trying to unilaterally ‘rescue’ Kokabiel from his execution, as they saw it. It sucks, but there you are. And don’t even get me started on the pushback from the rest of the Grigori about ‘letting’ Kokabiel be executed like that. That’s been even more annoying to deal with than the diplomatic side of things.”

Vali growled, but Azazel was unmoved, finishing what he was doing with the phone with one hand, then with a smirk, continued to count backward on the fingers of his other hand, an affectation that he had begun to develop when he figured out that it annoyed Vali. That was just the kind of father that Azazel was, when he could be bothered to interact with Vali at all these days rather than his research into Sacred Gears, anyway.

“So, the solution was either A, keep you here for a few months and let things cool down a bit. B, as the church representatives suggested and Shemhazai and Baraquiel wholeheartedly agreed with, put a collar on you. Or C, but a tracker on you and force you to check in regularly. That was my suggestion, and I got the others to agree to it eventually.”

Vali had stopped listening after Azazel had mentioned putting a tracker on him, and he quickly began to look down at his body, scowling for a second, before pulling off one of his shoes as Azazel kept on speaking. “Now, I put in a timer on your cellphone that will ring every three hours so loudly it might make a normal person’s ears bleed. You check in here with me every three hours, or else we’ll have to go with the tracker...”

“You already put a tracker on me, Azazel?!” Vali shouted, pulling off his shoe and hurling it at Azazel.

Azazel ducked, protesting that that tracker wouldn’t have been activated unless Vali missed one of his three-hour check-ins. This argument fell on deaf ears as Vali launched himself at Azazel, only to receive a punch to the face that sent him reeling.

“Don’t look down on your old man as if he’s a pushover, Vali. You still haven’t won one of our spars YEEET!” Azazel grunted as a kick to his leg threatened to upend him and, after rolling backward, Vali shoulder charged into the older man, taking him to the floor.

End flashback

The day had sort of devolved from there. The makeshift brawl interrupted only when one of the Grigori’s agents in Japan poked his head in. The man, a useless two-winged fallen who was so weak that Vali had never bothered to learn his name, had said he had someone in

his territory saying he was an old friend who wanted to get in touch with Azazel again. Vali didn't know who that was, although it also didn't matter much to him one way or another.

Eventually, Vali had been able to leave the Grigori headquarters without a tracker on his person, although he hadn't been able to get out of needing to check in every three hours. Worse, while the Khaos Brigade had a lot of resources, they lacked someone who could imitate the sound and personality of another person to the point of fooling someone like Azazel. Every time he called it was with a different series of questions and comments, and no one could anticipate them, certainly not enough to plan out a response.

Thankfully, I was able to check-in right before I spotted Ranma moving over the rooftops. I should have more than enough time to fight to my heart's content here. Oh, and I suppose Diodora should have enough time to do whatever that weakling is up to.

Not that Vali cared at all one way or the other about what his fellow Khaos Brigade member was up to. They weren't friends or even acquaintances. Diodora and Vali were simply connected to the same organization and, even then, for very different reasons. Diodora wanted personal power and authority among devilkin. He wasn't even part of the Old Satan Faction that made up the majority of the devils involved with the Khaos Brigade, just someone who was willing to do literally anything in order to have the authority to do anything he wanted.

On the other hand, there were people like Vali, who were only involved with the Khaos Brigade because it was the best way they could find strong opponents that they could fight. Vali wasn't even so much alongside the rest of the Khaos Brigade about ending this era of so-called peace between the Three Factions. That was simply a means to an end. If Vali could find a steady stream of strong opponents to challenge himself against without that, he'd do it in a heartbeat. *I have nothing but contempt for people like Diodora, willing to take power when it's offered by Ophis too. It's obvious to anyone with a brain that Ophis' offer of a power-up comes with a price.*

"I think we're far enough away from anything too breakable, so long as we don't try to break the mountain itself, anyway," Ranma quipped, his voice interrupting Vali's thoughts.

Vali watched as Ranma leaped down towards the ground, where he landed, twirling around in place to face Vali. Wordlessly, Vali dropped gently to the forest floor, his hands still in his pockets as they had been since they'd begun this trek, the wings of Divine Dividing disappearing. *No need to go all out right away, I want to savor this.*

"I'm not in the habit of damaging real estate to that extent. Not unless I have to. And for you, I doubt I will," Vali taunted, still holding his hands in his pockets for the moment. "Are you going to whip out those weapons of yours?"

"Maybe eventually. If you're worth it," Ranma taunted back, the two men smirking at one another.

Both had attempted to get under the skin of the other man but had known it would be futile before they even tried. Now, they stared across one another, their stances remarkably similar. Ranma's was only superficially at ease, his legs and back tensed and ready for action even as his arms looked to be loose at his side. His eyes were locked on Vali. Not his face, but his upper body, watching and waiting for the first telltale sign of movement.

Whereas Vali really was at ease, waiting. Vali knew that he was faster and stronger than Ranma despite the youth's strange ki techniques.

When Ranma moved, it did come as something of a surprise. Instead of charging forward, Ranma flicked the foot up, launching a small stone at Vali's face. He batted it aside automatically, then used his other hand to block the next punch coming in from Ranma. He was almost hit by a follow-on roundhouse kick, ducking underneath with barely a hair to spare. Then he used a hand to block the next upwards rising punch that would've caught him in the face. His own punch back was just as easily dodged, and then, they were off, exchanging punches and kicks quickly.

After several moments, Vali bounced off the tree behind him, launching himself forward, breaking Ranma's combo for a second, but Ranma easily ducked underneath him before kicking himself into the air, rising higher than Vali had. This surprised Vali, and Ranma was able to catch him in the side of the face with a kick, although he had to redirect himself mid-air to avoid a punch from Vali, which went through where Vali had thought he would be a second ago.

Vali stumbled back, then tried to regain the upper hand by pushing himself higher into the air, using his devil wings for a second to hover among the foliage.

In response, Ranma bounced off one tree then onto another, then upwards into the branches. Vali had anticipated that and launched himself towards him, yet when he did, Ranma dropped downwards faster than Vali could track before bouncing up, using a tree branch like a springboard to close again from underneath and slightly towards Vali's legs, giving him an advantage for a second. Vali mitigated that by retreating straight up, then coming back in as Ranma settled down onto a tree branch.

Back and forth, they went through the treetops, each missing blow shattering a tree limb, carving a divot out of a tree trunk or simply smashing the tops of trees entirely. Neither was able to get in another solid blow for several minutes.

Then, surprising Vali, a blow got through his defenses to crack into his chest. The next second, one nearly caught in the nose, and an upward rising knee slammed into his thigh with deadening force rather than Vali's chest as he had anticipated.

I knew from our brief interaction in Kuoh that this guy could hit hard, but feeling it again is an entirely different thing, Vali reflected.

Oh, he had been hit harder. Azazel and hit him harder in their fight a few days back. Hercules hit him harder when they were sparring, as did Bikou. Yet even so, coming from a normal human without a sacred year, the fact Vali even felt pain at all from these strikes was damned impressive. *Or is it more of that ki stuff?*

Vali had tried to research that and had come away with quite a bit of knowledge about it, but that didn't really matter. It wasn't an energy that Albion had run into during his life or when bonded to his previous users, and thus, he couldn't divide it. That was one of the limitations of his abilities: it had to be something that Albion had run into while he was alive. Considering how fraught with combat the White Dragon Emperor's life had been, this wasn't a limitation that had come up before, but it had when Vali had been struck by a ki blast in Kuoh.

Regardless of that, he shouldn't be able to get through my defenses like this, Vali thought, lashing out with a punch-kick combo that Ranma deftly avoided. The tree that he had been previously in paid the price for this movement, several of its branches being shattered, and losing several yards of tree trunk above and below where the hit landed, the trunk shattering on impact.

However, Vali was too slow to pull his leg back and found himself grimacing as several blows landed on his knee, thigh and lower leg before he brought up his other leg and a kick that forced Ranma to block, which he did, flipping himself upwards from the momentum of the strike, kicking off a tree branch above and punching out hard toward Vali's face. Vali blocks several of those punches, only to then find an elbow coming towards his face as Ranma pushed one of his punches aside just enough to turn Vali around and interfere with his defense. That blow landed on the side of his head, and Vali returned it with a strike that sent Ranma flying backward through the tree branches.

He reached up to the side of his head, rubbing it as Ranma grabbed onto a branch and twirled to a stop before coming back towards him. *Okay, he's getting the better of me when it comes to hand-to-hand. How he's doing it I've no idea, but he is. Time to up the ante a bit.*

For his part, Ranma knew that he was holding on against this guy by the skin of his teeth. Vali was easily one of the fastest and by far the most durable fighter that Ranma had ever met, able to move with a speed and precision that Ranma could match only when he was pushing himself beyond Amaguriken-level speed. In fact, if Ranma hadn't kept up his training since fighting Saffron, Vali could probably have been even faster than Ranma. As it was, Ranma was able to keep up with Vali in terms of speed, while using the ki to empower his strikes, not a lot, not enough to be visible but enough to let him actually hurt the guy.

It's a constant slow dribble from my ki reserves, and if I'm not careful, this guy can probably just outlast me. Regardless, I'll learn a lot more in a fight like this than in any other, Ranma thought, smirking a little at what he'd already learned. Just like most of the other devils and fallen angels Ranma had dealt with so far, Vali was all about power, all about his physical stats, so to speak. To someone like Ranma, the guy had so many tells it wasn't even funny. He

was also just a little bit too slow in pulling back from a strike, something that had cost him twice now.

Time to make him pay for it again. With that, Ranma charged forwards.

As he charged, Divine Dividing appeared from Vali's back. First, his shoulders were covered with a line of white scales, almost like thin pauldrons, and then, dark blue energy wings appeared, flaring up and back from his shoulders to either side. Without even needing to flap, Vali was up in the air above the tree branch he'd been standing on and then zooming forward faster than Ranma could track for just a second. Before he could acclimatize to his enemy's new level of speed, a blow took Ranma in the center of his chest, causing him to gag as he found himself hurled backward, smashing through several tree branches to crack into a tree several yards away about halfway up its trunk.

As a semi-dazed Ranma slid down that tree trunk and tried to get his bearings, Vali appeared behind the tree, shattering the tree with a kick that also sent Ranma forwards and down towards the ground below. Ranma didn't land, though. Reaching out with a hand, Ranma grabbed onto a tree branch, twisting himself sideways and up to avoid a follow-on strike.

Blue gold ki appeared around him as he did, and then Ranma was back in on the attack, a vicious grin appearing on his face for just a second as he prepared to call on his newest technique. Reaching out not to his own ki but to the connection he had with Jusenkyo, Ranma allowed the chaos magic to slowly build up into his body, which he launched at Vali while blocking the next blow.

There was a flash, and his bonded partner's voice shouted, ***"Vali break off!"***

Instantly, Vali raised a leg and kicked out hard at Ranma, only to find Ranma dancing backward mid-air, lashing out with his fists towards his leg again, smashing into it from both sides twice. Despite the pain from his leg now really starting to bother him, Vali continued to push away from him up into the air, flying between the branches until he was well above the tree line. Below, Ranma followed as best he could, perching on one of the tallest trees for a second, glaring up at him.

For his part, Vali stared down at his hand, stunned. "What... the... fuck. Albion, you're supposed to divide magical attacks, and this sure as hell looks like magic to me!"

It is magic, but it's chaos magic damn it all! How the hell is he doing that?" The white Dragon Emperor muttered. ***"That spell had enough power to force that transformation on your entire arm up to your elbow. Just be grateful that I was able to divide the energy behind it, at least if not the effect itself."***

Vali scowled, concentrating, pushing his own magic down into his fingers, all of which had turned to Clay. They were mobile but still visibly **clay**. Vali very much did not want to rush

down to Ranma with his fingers like that, knowing it would be a weakness that Ranma would target quickly. *Losing my fingers in a fight like this would not only be debilitating but humiliating.* “Explain then.”

“Dammit, Vali, you should have listened more to Azazel when he was explaining magical theory to you. Listen, magic is all about the underlying power and the thought or form placed upon it by the user to create an effect on the world around you, right?”

“Yeah, that matches with what I can remember of Dad’s lectures. But you should’ve then...”

“I’m getting there, brat! The difference is chaos magic doesn’t have an idea inside it until it hits the target, and then the change to the physical world that occurs is entirely random! It’s impossible to suppress that affect fully and it’s not under Ranma’s control, either. It is completely random what happens when it hits you. Luckily, he seems to only be able to do it when he hits you, and I can divide the magic behind the attack. But I can’t do anything about an unformed idea,” Albion warned.

“Great, just great,” Vali grumbled as his fingers finally began slowly to turn back into flesh and blood. *Weird, I can’t even feel any difference, but I for damn sure can see one.* “All right, so I’m going to have to deal with bits of my body turning to clay?”

“No, like I said, and you better listen this time. It’s random. He could just as easily have turned your entire arm into a flower, made flowers sprout from it, fuse the two of you together somehow, made a bright flash, or anything. Chaos magic is just that, chaotic!”

“Where in the hell did he get something like that? It’s not a Sacred Gear, right?”

“You’d have been able to feel it within him,” Albion agreed. ***“I have no idea. Although, we do know he’s cursed from the cursed springs. Maybe with that curse we saw in the reports about Ranma. Maybe some kind of connection with the Jusenkyo comes with the curse? That area is easily the largest source of chaos magic on earth or any of its pocket dimensions.”***

Ignoring that for a moment, Vali scowled a bit. “In that case, all I can do is not let him hit me.”

This proved easier said than done, but Ranma wasn’t powering every extra shriek he launched toward Vali with wild magic. Rather, he only did so a few times. Then, astonishing both the white Dragon Emperor and Vali, as he ducked under a blow from Vali, he flung his hand downwards, aiming a spell at the ground underneath where Vali was hovering as his hand touched the forest floor.

Even as Ranma rolled away from a heel kick, that spell struck, and suddenly, gravity all around them became ten or five times heavier than it had been. Vali found his feet on the

ground, his wings unable to put out enough power to lift him into the air yet, and Ranma grunted under the impact of the pressure before pushing himself to stand upright with difficulty. Turning to face Vali, he admitted, "Mistakes have been made. But this effect could make for good training."

"I know, right? I'm not a big anime fan, but that bit from Dragon Ball Z when Goku trained in the gravity room always made me a little jealous," Vali admitted, also feeling the pressure, although not to the extent that Ranma was. The two of them actually grinned at one another for a second, a moment of two kindred spirits.

Then Vali launched a boot to the head, which was blocked before Vali was forced to block a punch to his sternum in turn, and the fight was on again. Luckily for both combatants, although primarily for Ranma, the gravity spell that his wild magic had created only lasted for a little under five minutes as they continued to fight, during which Ranma got the worst of it. It wasn't entirely one-sided, with Vali willing or unable to take to the air again and Ranma simply unable to, but it was clear he was doing better than Ranma under the effect of the gravity spell.

When the heavy gravity spell ran out of power, Ranma was the first to quickly take advantage, closing in under Vali's defense and slamming several hard blows into his stomach and chest, and, as Vali retreated upwards, one to his thigh that had him spinning in place. Ranma leaped up after them, his next blow powered by wild magic.

When he blocked it with his forearm, Vali's arm began to itch like crazy. So much so that he pulled away from Ranma and began to scratch at the place. "What the hell, okay, what caused this? More chaos magic, but..."

"I think that spell was supposed to make it seem as if you had itching powder under your skin." Albion mused. As a dragon who had dealt with scale rash on more than one occasion, he shivered in Vali's mindscape. ***"That is nasty!"***

Ranma closed before Vali could figure out a way to use his internal magic to banish that spell, and this time, the blow that struck Vali nearly broke his nose, while one to the ear had his head ringing. His return blow sent Ranma through several trees and even a large boulder, but Ranma's ki was already healing him even before he slowed his momentum and Vali had to reach up to his nose to wipe away the blood. He did so with a grin, though, his eyes alighting up with berserk energy as he began to enjoy the fight even more.

"Woo, he was actually able to get a hit on you?" a familiar, to Vali anyway, voice said from one of the nearby trees.

Turning in that direction, Vali saw himself looking at a monkey youkai, one he was somewhat familiar with and would even call an acquaintance. "Bikou, what are you doing here?"

Ranma paused, taking in the newcomer too, worried that this was bound to turn into a two-on-one. He was young, probably around Vali's age, which made him a little bit older than Ranma himself. He had light brown hair cut in a crew cut and wore what looked like armor on his upper body, leaving his arms bare up to the shoulders. In one hand, he held a staff, both ends tipped with what looked like bronze or copper, with an image of a dragon winding its way between the two pairs along the shaft.

He wore what looked like a golden crown of some kind, although, even in his present state, Ranma couldn't stop himself from blurting out, is that a tiara? I didn't even think they made those for guys."

Instead of being annoyed at that, Bikou barked a laugh. "I know, right? It looks a little too flimsy to be a crown or anything really serious. Still, it's also a lot lighter than those contraptions too. It's kind of an homage to the thing that made my 'honored' ancestor turn to the straight and narrow instead of continuing to have fun."

The monkey youkai turned to Vali, about to ask him a question, then slowly turned back to look at Rama for a moment, his brows furrowing as he peered at him closely. "You look oddly familiar...."

Vali, who'd been about to tell his friend to back away, blinked, pulling his hand away from his broken nose for a second to stare at him, then Ranma. "If you think you are going to muscle in on my fight, Bikou, think again. He's mine."

Looking back at the newcomer, Ranma also frowned a little. "You kind of look familiar to me too, although from where I've no idea."

With that, Ranma launched himself forward, knowing from Vali's words that this guy wasn't going to interfere with their fight. "And even less desire to care! I've got a fight on Monkey Man, so if ya wanna sit and watch, that's fine by me!"

The two of them continue to exchange blows for a few moments, with Vali now unable to divide much of Ranma's ki strikes or the magic behind his chaos magic blows. Bikou continued to watch for a few moments, then, as Vali kicked Ranma away, only to eat an energy blast of all things that hit him in the head, he began to laugh. "I remember!"

Both combatants paused for a second, with Vali finding himself stumbling to a stop near the tree where Bikou had been watching the fight. "Is this really--" whatever Bikou was remembering, it was funny enough for him to interrupt Vali, pointing with his staff towards Ranma. "Hey, do you remember visiting a monkey temple at one point? The temple devoted to a monkey God I, I mean, down in Fujian, China?"

Rama frowned, stopping his charge forward, then slowly nodded. "Yeah, but I also remember my Pops and I didn't steal anything or anything else serious. He did something to

anger the head priest there, and then we were being chased away by monkeys. Considering how often I was nearly hit by crap, I figure whatever my old man did was paid in full, you know?”

“That’s right!” Bikou laughed, shaking his head. “That old man you are with, the bald one, ooooh, is he your Pops? Damn, if that’s what you have to look forward to, why don’t you let Vali off you now?” Bikou laughed, finding almost as much humor in that as in the memory of what had happened at the temple to the Great Monkey Sage. “But seriously, do you remember why you were there?”

“First of all, fuck you. Second of all, we were there to look for a cure for our curses. It was the **only** time that my Pops was proactive about that,” Ranma grumbled, shaking his head. Knowing what he knew now, and moreover, the magic he was able to siphon off from Jusenkyo, Ranma wasn’t certain he would have gone for a cure even if one were offered. Yet it still annoyed the hell out of him that Genma had never really searched for a cure-all that often, only tagging along whenever Ranma or Ryoga found clues to one.

“Right. Why in the hell were you two coming to a temple devoted to Sun Wukong to look for a cure for something so hilarious? Did you honestly think that a ‘trickster god’ like my Gramps would try to help you?” Bikou laughed again. “And then, when the chief priest explained that to your old man, he tried to take offense, shouting something about knowing that we had magic or something. Seriously, kid, I hope you don’t get much from your Pops, neither in the looks nor in the brain department. Attacking a priest of Sun Wukong in his temple was one of the stupidest things I ever saw.”

“Honestly, it wouldn’t even rank in a top twenty list of stupid shit my old man’s done,” Ranma grumbled. “But I wanna make certain, there ain’t no bad feelings or anything? No promises he made to that priest guy in an effort to get us a cure? I don’t think there would be since we didn’t get one but I wanna make certain.”

While Bikou and Ranma talked, Vali took the opportunity to take stock of how the fight was going. *Divine Dividing isn’t useful against Ranma’s life energy on a defensive level, and offensively, he can dodge practically everything I launch. How he’s doing so, I have no idea. Is he somehow reading my movements to the point that he can anticipate my attacks? Besides that, strength, speed, and agility we’re pretty even across the board. He can also take hits, way better than I expected, if I’m honest. Although, I suppose I could just pull back and spam long-range attacks at him. If I’m high enough in the air, there’s nothing he can do about it.*

Vali pointed this out now, watching Ranma stiffen as he was pulled from his conversation with Bikou before allowing a slow, predatory smile to cross his face. “I won’t, though. That would be cheating. I’m going to beat you into the ground the old-fashioned way.”

“... That sounded dirty,” Ranma slowly deadpanned, causing Bikou to guffaw. Then he laughed even louder as Vali lost his temper at the dig and charged forwards.

Bikou leaned against the tree for several moments, watching the two of them go hammer and tongs, wondering why Vali was ordered to help Diodora out of all people. *Or did he volunteer for it when he learned what he'd have to do? That guy is pretty good at keeping up with Vali like this, even if, like Vali just said, he could end this fight in an instant by simply flying high enough and then raining spells down. Although, considering that we are not within a dimensional bubble, there's a good reason not to do that above and beyond Vali's desire to draw the fight out.*

He watched as, instead of using his magic, Vali ripped a whole tree out of the ground, using it to swat Ranma out of the air as he leaped down towards Vali from a tree. "You're supposed to shout fore when you hit someone like that, Vali!"

"I'm not a meme monster like you," Vali retorted before Ranma was back upright and charging forward. Deciding he quite liked the fact that he had hit Ranma with a tree (just because he didn't know meme didn't mean that Vali didn't have a sense of humor), Vali pulled back his tree trunk, then launched it forward again like a spear, only for Ranma to duck underneath it.

Ranma lashed out with both hands, holding them out towards Vali as he launched another wide-area wild magic spell. Ranma had hoped for some kind of offensive spell, something that would slam Vali away, knowing that by this point, he was slowly beginning to lose this fight. Vali could simply take more damage than Ranma could, even with his ki healing, despite the fact that Ranma was landing at least three or four blows for every one of Vali's that got through.

Instead, what happened was a wide area cone-like yellow flash that didn't attack Vali at all, nor Bikou, who found himself in the area covered by the flash. The spell didn't do anything to either of them. Rather, it targeted whatever they were holding or had on their person. Bikou felt his crown flipping open off his head. Vali found his phone and several ramen packets in his magically expanded pocket pulled out, floating into the air to join the tree trunk as it left his hands rocketing towards Ranma, just as the staff in Bikou's hand was also pulled out of his grip towards the martial artist.

"OY, those ain't yours, you damn thief!" Bikou shouted, making a grab for his staff, thinking it was far more important than his crown, but both were out of his reach before he could recover. Both it and his crown slammed into the tree trunk, which itself almost caught Ranma. With a yelp, Ranma jumped up and over it, reaching out and snagging the staff in one hand, Bikou's crown in the other.

He tossed the crown up and down in one hand, staring at Bikou thoughtfully before a wicked smirk appeared on his face, and he tossed the crown to one side, twirling the staff in one hand before bringing the other hand to grab it further down the shaft, pointing the staff at Vali, who was rapidly grabbing up his ramen stash. "You know, all that talk about the temple and Sun Wukong was enough to give me ideas."

The watching Bikou growled, leaping towards Ranma from one tree to the other. "Don't you do it, don't you dare you..."

"Power Pole, extend!" Ranma shouted.

Vali looked up just in time to eat the end of Bikou's staff, which slammed into his face with all the power of a runaway freight train, hurling him backward into several trees and then into the side of the mountain that they had been fighting on up to this point. Divine Dividing was able to take away at least half of the momentum of the strike but it still hurt like a bitch.

Watching this, Bikou was horrified, not certain which was worse, the fact that his staff had been taken away from them so easily, the fact that Ranma was able to use it... or the fact that he actually found that hilarious. "That's still my damn staff, kid. You have no idea how much shit I'd be forced to eat if I lost that."

"If you're not a complete dick, I'll give the staff back to you after I'm done using it on your friend. Don't worry, I'm not the type to turn a spar into murder," Ranma quipped, grinning as the power pole shifted back down into a regular staff size. He then charged towards Vali, bounding his way through the trees almost too fast for Bikou to follow, let alone keep up with.

Bikou swept-dropped a bit, shaking his head at the younger boy man's naïveté and easy-going attitude to fighting for his life against one of the strongest young fighters in the mystical world. "I guess he doesn't know I'm part of the Khaos Brigade, or would he care if I was?" Setting that aside, Bikou charged after Ranma, shouting out, "Hell no. Give me my Power Pole, you thief!"

OOOOOOO

Saeko's battle was far more serious than Ranma's and much less chaotic than Rias'. In fact, it wasn't so much a fight as torture. Indeed, it was the sort that Akeno enjoyed inflicting on her enemies, although in this case, even Akeno might have thought this was beyond the pale.

For a little over an hour, Saeko had carefully made her way through the hallway, always looking out for more traps, and finding several and destroying or disarming them. Those traps were both magical and machine in origin, but none could survive a well-spotted strike from Saeko. After that, at Shizuka's behest, she cleared the rest of the room. In so doing, they had found another entrance that took them straight to another pool of water. Neither had explored it yet but hoped that this entrance would allow them out faster than the way they came in. With their air canisters having well less than half, there was no way the pair would be able to go back the way they had come in.

After that, Saeko returned to the blade in the center of the room. She had reached for it, touching it with a finger, and then suddenly, she was holding the thing as if it had seemingly teleported into her hand of its own accord. And then, lightning had begun, coruscating up and

down the sword edge. A wind had flashed into being throughout the hallway, strong enough to lift and slam Shizuka back into a wall with bone-numbing force, keeping her there as the image of an enraged deity seemingly appeared out of mid-air. Made out of lightning storm clouds, it hovered there for a second before disappearing into Saeko's body.

For all of the lightning coursing up and down Saeko's body like she'd become a Tesla coil, her skin wasn't being turned into ash. Rather, the lightning seemingly was entering her body, from her mouth and eyes, her hand and skin as if searching.

Shizuka pushed herself off of the wall, trying to make her way forward, arms outstretched and shouting Saeko's name, but the whirlwind of force pressed her backward again, keeping her away from her friend entirely. Shizuka couldn't make any headway and instead was forced to make her way around, trying to come closer that way, and then push towards Saeko from another direction, only to fail again. Meanwhile, Saeko continued to shriek in pain. Eventually, Shizuka was forced to clamp her hands over her ears, trying to block out the sound, unable to reach her or do anything to help.

Tearing her eyes away from Saeko's writhing form, Shizuka shook her head firmly, then moved along the outer wall, unable to push herself towards her friend more than a foot against the heavy wind pressure. "I, if I can't help Saeko-chan, I, I need to do something, anything to help. And the only thing I can do is drag those air tanks up here along with our scuba gear. Then maybe explore the other pool we found as much as I can."

Maybe distance and the water will also drown out Saeko's screams, she thought, shivering as she slowly made her way down the steep steps back the way they came.

If Saeko had been able to have anything resembling a coherent thought under the tumbled of pain, she would have been able to answer that the lightning, or perhaps the presence beyond the lightning wind and storm that was embedded into the sword, was indeed searching her for something. This was not a gentle search, obviously. Her mind, heart and soul, **everything** was bared to this blade. Her faith was questioned and accepted, but everything else, every dirty secret, every moment in her life, was grabbed and examined as if under a jeweler's magnifying glass. Secrets that she had only shared with Ranma and secrets that she had yet to share with him, events from her childhood, her hidden thoughts, her dreams, her desires, all of it. The sword was searching her entire being, judging her, wondering if she was worthy of it.

Through the haze of agony, Saeko was eventually able to bring her mind together. Clenching her jaw around her screams, Saeko cut them off just as Shizuka returned, gasping from the effort of pulling the air tanks with her.

Eventually, as Shizuka reached the new waterway with her scuba goggles and fins in hand, Saeko was able to form a single coherent thought, shouting it mentally, shrieking it into the storm that was whirling through her body. *Search me. Fine, I no longer care what people think! I will use this blade to strike down evil, and if I enjoy it, why does that matter so long as I*

do not lose myself to the enjoyment to the point I become blind to what is truly evil and what is not? I will master this blade, I will become stronger or I will join the corpses we saw on our way here!

OOOOOOO

“Wow, would you look at that!”

The shout woke Shampoo up from her nap hidden among some of the luggage stowed in the overhead racks of the train she had snuck onto heading to Hakata. *What are these idiot Nipponese shouting about?* She thought blurrily. *Ugh, I know there isn't much to do but nap, but I hate waking up from naps in this form.* As the shouts continued though, she hesitantly poked her head out, cocking her cat head to one side in order to hear better.

“Is that some kind of giant pole?”

“Dude, I don't know how, but you made that sound dirty.”

“Is that some kind of fire?”

“Can't be, there's no smoke. Besides, that looked more like a tongue of flame flashing upward, didn't it?”

“Are they shooting a movie or something?”

“They have to be. That's in a national park, right? And look, that's some kind of lightning strike, and there isn't a cloud in the sky.”

“Is that someone flying?! Wow, whatever movie there shooting, they didn't spare any expense on special effects.”

There was a certain amount of downside to Vali's decision not to throw up a dimensional bubble. That being that when the fight got serious and Vali's offensive attacks and Ranma's wild magic got involved, it was visible from quite a ways away.

Shampoo pushed herself out from where she had been hiding in order to look at whatever everyone was seeing. The motion causing a little girl, who had just begun to look up from her coloring book to look up. She gasped in delight, pointing. “Oh, look at the kitty!”

It wasn't the best angle, but Shampoo could still see something of what the people were talking about. Specifically, a pole of some kind suddenly erupting from within the forest up towards a flying man who dodged nimbly to one side.

Yet, while everyone else there was credulous enough to assume that this was some kind of movie, Shampoo knew better. She couldn't make out any details from this far away, indeed, even the fact the thing in the air was a man was more based on shape than anything else was, but Shampoo was familiar enough with Ranma to assume that if something supernatural was going on knew where Ranma was, he was going to be involved. *Especially since the next stop should be Hakata, where Airen and those floozies were going.*

With that, Shampoo retreated a little further deeper into the luggage, then shifted between the pieces of luggage in the way of all small animals, until she was away from the little girl who'd spotted her. She waited there until the train began to slow to a stop, then jumped down, bouncing off one man's shoulders, much to his shock, then to the head of another person, then out onto the platform. There, she began to dodge both hands reaching down for her and the feet of people who didn't see her coming, racing along so fast several dozen people were left staring in shock.

Soon, Shampoo angled her course towards a bathroom. Ducking between a girl's legs, snickering to herself a sound that came out as a snort in her kitten form. *Good grief, crotchless panties under that long skirt? Someone's desperate, aren't you?*

Seeing that there weren't many people, Shampoo hopped up onto the counter, where she twisted one of the water dispensers to hot. As it filled up the basin, she was forced to duck in before a woman from behind her, the same woman with the crotchless panties she could see in the mirror, tried to grab her. An instant later, Shampoo was sitting in the basin, idly reaching behind her to turn off the hot water that was now running down her ass crack. Crossing her legs and arms, she glared at the woman who was still standing there, frozen in shock. "Well? You going try grab Shampoo again?"

The woman continued to stare for a second then her eyes rolled back in her head and she slumped forward, almost hitting her head into the counter. Two others in the women's bathroom also slumped, their eyes rolling back in their heads.

Snorting at that, Shampoo hopped to her feet, pulling at the small bag tied around her neck, which she opened swiftly. Soon, Shampoo was changed into her regular attire, and leaving the unconscious women behind her as well two other women who had walked in as she was changing in one of the stalls, heading towards the stairs heading up. *I swear to Athena that the most annoying thing about my form is the fact that I haven't ever been able to learn how even Genma of all people figured out how to change from one form to another and still retain his clothing. Mousse and Ryoga I could understand, at least they have some skill as martial artists, and they only figured it out a few months prior to the fight against the Phoenix tribe. Yet GENMA figured it out way before that. GENMA! Why the heck haven't I been able to?*

The idea of actually asking one of the others how they did so it never occurred to Shampoo. If it had, then she might have discovered that it had to do with thinking of your

clothing as you changed from one form to another. Yet it hadn't, and the underlying idea also hadn't yet occurred to her.

Striding out of the bathroom, Shampoo ignored several people who were still staring around, talking to one another excitedly about the cute cat that they'd seen, heading up into the city, where she quickly leapt up onto a nearby building, then from there to a higher one. Soon, Shampoo was high enough in the skyline to see in the direction where the martial arts/magical type of violence was going on and she raced in that direction.

Within another twenty minutes, as the battle continued to rage, Shampoo closed through the forest with it. She had seen but ignored the sight of several national park people and police arguing with one another about jurisdiction and what to do about the 'movie' that was apparently being made in the park without having paid for it. *Hah, I suppose the devils or whatever Airen is fighting are going to have their hands full erasing memories. Aaiyaaa, but that was scary learning they could do that! Thankfully, they never tried that shit in Nerima.*

Soon, Shampoo found herself watching Ranma fight another young man. He looked perhaps a little older than Mousse and was flying above Ranma with dark blue wings protruding from his shoulders, dodging blows from a staff, and then trying to close, only to find himself parried away. Nearby, another young man scowled as he watched from halfway up a tree, his arms crossed and looking mulish about something.

The two combatants seemed to be in something of a stalemate, but Shampoo could tell that it wasn't going to be lasting very long. The unknown young man was using pure speed and his wings to good effect, while she could sense with her, admittedly, limited ki sense, that Ranma was using his ki reserves to heighten his strength and speed. The young man had taken a few strong shots to various places on his body that were very noticeably bruised or bleeding, and for some reason, one of his ears had been turned into a flower while the hand on his other side had been burned. Shampoo estimated that Ranma would probably not last longer than another hour, if that.

Seeing that, Shampoo decided to announce her arrival in the proper Amazon manner. Flicking up her arms until her palms, and most importantly, her sleeves, were pointing at the young man in the air. It had taken her several years to do so, but Shampoo had finally created a trick that Mousse had come up with upon learning his family's hidden weapons style: how to launch items from her ki space. It had everything to do with how you shaped your ki space and 'organized' what lay within. It was ki-intensive, and the size of her ki space wasn't large, especially in clothing that had been itself in a ki-expanded pouch. Yet Shampoo had known that, and had planned accordingly.

Within seconds, lots of small daggers, needles, and normal-sized hammers flew out from her. There were only around thirty or so weapons all told, after which Shampoo's ki space was almost empty bar her two chui. That was alright, though as the small weapons flew out with enough force to shatter stone when they hit, something she had experimented with in the past.

Both unknown young men saw them coming. Bikou danced in place, while Vali twitched away, ducking, dodging, and twisting around trying to see where the attack it come from, while Ranma was forced to dodge a few hammers that had gone astray.

“What’s this nowWW!?” Bikou grunted as a curled hammer slammed into his chest with enough force to knock the wind out of him. At the same time, Vali ducked under one hammer that was about to hit his head, then dodged in-between the thrown daggers, only for one of them to nick his lower leg. It wasn’t going fast enough to stick in, but it did actually hurt, like taking a punch from Ranma but with all the force condensed into a smaller area. “OW! How fast are those things going?”

“That was pure momentum. I had Divided it obviously, but it was still moving insanely fast. That attack almost reminds me of that book Benemune tried to get you to read, the sci-fi one. Pretty impressive,” Albion muttered in his mind.

For his part, Ranma had to blink in surprise. “Shampoo, what are you doing here?” *I mean, obviously, she probably followed us, but why?* Ranma added mentally, as he smacked aside a rebounding needle. *And that’s an interesting new trick she just used.*

“Airen, what story with Flying Boy?” Shampoo asked, staring up at young man who had dodged through most of her attacks. That attack had been something Shampoo had thought of as a secret attack much like Ranma did his school’s sealed techniques. To see both of these men take shots from her hidden weapon space assault and the only look a little bit injured by it was worrisome.

“His name’s Vali. He’s a bit of ass, and came looking for a fight,” Ranma said, flipping the power pole onto his shoulder, using his other hand to pointed Bikou. “Bikou’s here to check on him. This staff’s his, although he hasn’t actually told me if he’s got any separate business with me. If he does, I’m keeping the staff,” he warned Bikou again.

“Yeah, yeah you said it before, and if you try to take my staff, I’m going to hurt you!” Bikou grumbled, a little annoyed that Vali had actually ordered him to back off when Bikou had tried to join the fight.

“You’re going to try Monkey Boy,” Ranma smirked, gesturing upwards to Vali. “Ask him how well that’s going for him.”

Vali smirked and was about to say pretty well actually, when he saw Shampoo rolling her eyes, pulling out two more pairs of weapons from her sleeves. “Are we sure that’s not magic?” he asked instead, addressing Albion.

“I can’t detect any magic there. There’s magic in the girl for certain, the same kind of curse that Ranma has I think, or well, some kind of shape-changing curse,” Albion grumbled. ***“Now that you’ve been fighting him for a while I can sense it well enough.”***

Nodding at his companion's words, Vali watched as Shampoo moved to Ranma side, staring at the two other young men. "Is good! We beat these two, then Ranma, you come back with Shampoo to China."

There was no question there, it was simply a statement of fact, and that... well, that got Ranma's back up more than a bit. It harkened back to what Ranma had taken to mentally calling 'the bad old days' in Nerima, where he had to deal with Shampoo's craziness, Kodachi, Kuno, Akane, and the rival of the week, whoever that turned out to be. Even more, it was incredibly tone deaf to the changes Ranma had made in his life since leaving Nerima behind, the changes in his relationship with the Amazon Trio, and how Shampoo herself had lost not just to Saeko, but also Rias.

Alright, admittedly Rias and I weren't involved back then, but damn, it really looks like all Rias' trash talk went in one ear and out the other. At this point, he was friends with Mousse, while Shampoo, well, she wasn't even a friend, just a nuisance. Ranma hadn't put that into words in front of her, but Rias certainly had brought up a lot of points that Ranma had been thinking about his interactions with Shampoo back in Nerima. Come to think of it, I wonder if Cologne knows she's here? Probably not.

With all that in mind, Ranma decided to set things straight right now. "No offense, but I've got problems with both of those things," Ranma stated firmly, his tone implying that yeah, he did mean to give offense. *I knew Shampoo would ignore Rias' words, but this is just too far.* "One, this is a one-on-one fight, and I don't need anyone to come in and try and interfere. Vali forced Bikou to back off, I'll do the same with you."

Even if I'm losing, which I am even with the power pole. I might not be as hurt as Vali, but my ki's nearly run dry. I'll have to fall back on Jusenkyo's magic at that point, and Divine Dividing's making those attacks go from dangerous to annoying. I could use the demonic blades, but I honestly don't think they'd matter much against Vali. "And as for returning to China, why the heck would I want to do that? I'm with Saeko now, and I'm just not interested in you, Shampoo!"

While back in Nerima, Shampoo would've simply seen those words as simple ignorance or silliness on her beloved sport that had been back in Nerima, before the battle with Saffron. Before Ranma had gone off on his own and come back with Sword Girl.

Saeko's closeness with Ranma **infuriated** Shampoo, especially since Saeko had defeated her. Their similarities, both of them having purple hair, both of them being martial artists, simply worked to make her even angrier at the fact that Ranma favored the other girl over her, despite the fact that Ranma had known Shampoo for far longer. That wasn't even taking into consideration the events in Kuoh, where Shampoo had lost to Titty Red, as Shampoo thought of Rias, despite Titty Red not using any of her magic.

Then, Cologne had come after her and Mousse, and instead of backing Shampoo up as she had before, Cologne had tried to sit on Shampoo hard instead. She had called it a diplomatic necessity, but the reasoning had gone right over Shampoo's head.

More importantly, the fact that she wasn't the strongest girl around Ranma, and the reality of the large magical world, it made Shampoo feel small. And Shampoo, who had been the strongest girl in Nerima for years, who was the village champion, and who had defeated blooded warriors did not like that feeling. Shampoo wanted to return to the life she's had before, where Shampoo had been important, had been someone. She wanted Ranma where, in her opinion, Ranma belonged: by Shampoo's side. So hearing him reject her again was somewhat like the final straw that broke the camel's back.

"Why!? Because you already replaced Shampoo with Sword Girl? Or because Titty Red shake tits at you! Shampoo not certain if Ranma being healed by Asia help in long run! You keep thinking below belt rather than what good for you. What law say! You is my Airen, and that end of it! You come with Shampoo and love her like Shampoo know you do!" Shampoo shouted.

"Excuse me?! I ain't a big believer in following Japanese law, let alone the laws o' your small village! I've made that point a lot of times over the years! Unlike with Akane or Ukyo, there's no honor agreement between your family or mine Shampoo, it was all about me beating you at that tournament, where you gave me the Kiss of Death, remember? When you thought I was a girl? Then you turn around after finding out I'm a guy and start chasing me in one form, and trying to kill me whenever you find me in my female form," Ranma growled back, not wanting to open the can of worms that the rest of Shampoo's statement represented.

"That Ranma's fault! If Ranma only be open about his female form being cursed, Ranma never come to Nerima and get trouble with Kitchen Destroyer, or anyone else! We be living together as we should be in village!"

"You seem to assume I would've been happy there!"

"Shampoo make you happy be there! Whatever Sword Girl do you, Shampoo do too!"

To one side of this confrontation, if it could be called that, Bikou sidled through a few of the tree branches until he was below where Vali was hovering in the air. "Hey, you get the impression that both of them have kinda forgotten we're here?"

"Yep," Vali answered instantly. "I'm feeling a little embarrassed, although I can't say why."

"This reminds me of a few times when some friends, I had when I was younger, would argue with their girlfriends in front of me," Bikou admitted. "I mean, we ain't friends with the pigtailed ass, he's still got my power pole, but still..."

No, Bikou wasn't at all annoyed at how easily Ranma's strange chaos magic had been able to pull his staff out of his hand. No matter what Vali's smirk said.

The two of them turned their attention back to the argument in front of them, just in time to hear Shampoo shout over what Ranma was saying about some kind of wishing ring or something, her voice drowning it out to the point that neither of them could make up details. "Shampoo only do those things because you idiotic man even before you have Libido Point removed! You **never** know what best for you! You really think you would choose back then Kitchen Destroyer over Shampoo?"

"Oh joy, a choice between someone who hits me first things that she thinks is my fault, or someone who tortures me with her curse form and uses magic on me to try and change my mind against my will!" Ranma shot back caustically, the two of them now practically nose to nose and their anger as things that had to be said finally came out. "Yeah, I chose option D: None of the Fucking Above! I'm with Saeko and Rias now, and there's never been in an 'us' Shampoo, it's always been in your head!"

With a wordless scream of rage, Shampoo lashed out with her chui towards Ranma, who ducked under the blow, returning a punch that Shampoo barely dodged. She couldn't dodge the roundhouse blow from the staff that Ranma had purloined, which slammed into her side and sent her hurling away. Showing a surprising amount of durability, Shampoo rolled with it in midair though, kicking off of a tree, and snarling, "Shampoo take you back by force if have to!"

Several needles erupted from her sleeve heading towards Ranma, the last of the weapons Shampoo had stored inside her ki space, with one of them nicking his cheek, sending a numbing feeling through his face and mouth. This, however, did nothing to stop the pole thrust that slammed into Shampoo's chest before she could dodge, slamming her back into and pinning Shampoo against the tree behind her. "I've had it! I thought you had begun to understand what was going on, that there was nothing between us after the fight you had with Rias, after the fight you had before that with Saeko and how I always took her side, how I had rejected you!"

Leaning on the staff lightly to keep Shampoo stuck where she was, Ranma growled. "Get it through your thick Amazonian skull Shampoo, I am not interested in you! If I have to beat you into submission to get you to understand, tell me right now, and you won't be walking out of this forest under your own power!"

"... So, you want to fight him after he's done with the girl?" Bikou asked. *Eesh, she's pretty enough, but sounds like a total stalker. Nasty.* "I mean I still need to get my staff back, but..."

"Yea, no, not really. Any enthusiasm I had for this fight died the moment they started to shout at one another," Vali admitted, still feeling quite out of place. He wasn't the most socially capable individual, and perhaps that was heightening the embarrassment he was currently

feeling, but regardless, he wanted very much to be somewhere else right now. "I think I'm, I'm just going to go."

"Yeah. Hey, I know a great ramen spot in the next city over. If you fly me there, all pay," Bikou stated.

"Done." Vali answered instantly. If there was one way to get on his good side, it was to offer the man ramen.

"Cool. I'll just have to get my staff back first." With that, Bikou dropped down, landing next to Ranma.

Across from Ranma, Shampoo had looked down, at her chest, saying nothing, shaking in place with repressed emotions. Ranma had taken this as a sign that she had finally understood that route he was serious about there not being anything between them, now or ever.

He really should have known better.

As his weight was slightly removed from the staff, Shampoo raised a hand letting the final thing in her ki space fall out: a bottle of cold water. Before Ranma could react, Shampoo had dumped it over herself. "Ranma pay for messing with Amazon heart!"

"SHIT!" Ranma cursed, leaping away, but unfortunately, he hadn't heard Bikou landing beside him, and he found himself slamming into him. The two of them stumbled, falling to the ground as Bikou had only one foot on the ground when Ranma turned around.

Before either could try to disentangle themselves, Shampoo the kitten landed on the back of Ranma's head, Yowling, spitting and smacking the back of his head.

Despite the training Ranma had gone through with Koneko, Ranma still suffered from the effects of the Neko-Ken. He could handle seeing Koneko with her ears out, and had even once been able to do with her being 'affectionate' following the chase after Happosai they'd had after returning from the beach. He could even handle being in the presence of cats, so long as they were peaceful. So long as he could see them. Since Shampoo was on the back of his head and attacking, neither of those applied right now.

"Okay, kind of embarrassed myself now," Bikou grumbled, pushing Ranma off him. "I'm just gonna grab my pole and go, okay? You two obviously have some serious stuff to... are you growlLL!!!"

That was as far as he got before a ki-enhanced claw nearly sliced him in half. His armor shredded under the blow and the impact hurled him away to slam into and through a tree. "The fuck?!"

Vali blinked in interest, staring down at Ranma, as he twisted his head so hard that Shampoo was flung away. The kitten landed on her feet, an expression on its little face that very obviously conveyed the idea of 'what have I done?' very clearly. Then yelped as with a hiss, Ranma twisted in her direction, lashing out with... "Are those ki claws? Where were they a moment ago?"

"I think that he needs to enter some kind of berserk mindset. Look at Ranma's face," Albion directed.

Vali did so, and frowned. For some reason, despite very much being still a human face, Ranma's expression did resemble that of a cat. "What in the world? So, what he needed to be near a cat? How strange. Is it... involuntary? BizarrE!"

By that point, Shampoo had raced away through the woods, and Neko Ranma had looked up at the flying birdie hovering above him. Blinking, Neko-Ranma purred and jumped upward, lashing out at Lizard Bird. Neko Ranma could remember, in vague, animal terms, what happened to Ranma when he was in control of his faculties. The spar had been quite fun, and now Neko Ranma wanted to continue the fun.

Vali, on the other hand, yelped as a blade of ki nearly took his foot off above the knee if he hadn't dodged and flown higher out of the martial artist's reach. Even so, the ki blade, a trick that Ranma hadn't shown up to this point. "What the fuck?!"

"I can divide the speed of the strike, but not the strength of those hits," Albion warned instantly. ***"I... what's he doing now?"***

One thing that had to be said about Neko Ranma was that he really didn't have much of an attention span. With Vali having rocketed away, Neko Ranma settled back on his haunches staring from the hovering Lizard Bird to where the smell of Annoying Female had gone. Neko Ranma really wanted to smack that one around. She really needed to stop getting in the way of Neko Ranma's time with his mates, who, alas, weren't around. That was sad, and part of Neko Ranma wanted to go in search of them.

However another toy, the Monkey Man, had pushed himself to his feet. Yowling happily at that, Neko Ranma leaped over towards him.

"ERK!" Bikou yelped, dodging to one side, watching as Neko Ranma's ki blades cut through several trees like some of Vali's earlier attacks had. "Damn. You know what, I'm thinking us getting out of here is still a great idea!"

Jumping up over a lunge from Ranma, Bikou kicked off the side of a tree, rolling over him to grab up his power pole. Then he was up and moving again as Ranma, purring happily, raced after him. "What the heck's up with this guy?"

Deciding not to leave his friend in the lurch, Vali dove down and grabbed Bikou by his shoulders, catching him in the air and racing upward out of the forest into the air above. At that point, he saw several helicopters coming their way. "You know what, there seems to be more reason to get out of here than just Ranma and that girl's issues."

Vali was all for charging down and challenging this cat mind Ranma, but not if they were going to be interrupted by others again or would need to spend time erasing their minds and so forth. *And the fact he's in some kind of berserk mental state is a bit off-putting too. Huh, I wonder what Kuroka would say about that, someone gaining access to powerful martial arts techniques by acting like a cat?*

Bikou, staff in hand, nodded. "Yep. This all looks like it's shaping up to be someone else's problem. Unless you think your connection to Diodora is going to come up? Come to think of it, what's the green-haired dick up to?"

"No clue. He only wanted Ranma sidelined. As for me, I might need to eat some crow about being here looking for a fight. The timing will make someone suspicious, but I doubt that Ranma's going to mention it at all. I'd wager anything he'll be too embarrassed about what's going on now," Vali opined. "Right now, you mentioned ramen, right?"

Below them through the treetops, Vali could see Ranma had returned to the ground, making sad cat noises as he stared up at them. As Vali watched, Ranma turned and began to race away through the woods, ignoring the pair in the air as if whatever had grabbed his attention had simply removed them from his mind. "Yep, time for us to get out of here, I think. And next time, I'm going to be better ready for Ranma's ki tricks and his magical attacks."

OOOOOOO

With a grimace, Diodora dodged another blast of Power of Destruction, lashing out with his own magic in the form of several magical spheres and sword like spells, only to find them dissipating or turned aside by tossed talisman. Those talismans last only a few seconds, burning up from the power necessary to divert his spells, but that was enough to give Rias another opportunity to lash out with another Power of Destruction spell.

Diodora teleported forward to close with the defenders near the temple entrance, throwing off Rias' next aim, while Mousse and his remaining knight, the metal-shifting Maria Carezza, had basically sidelined one another. Mousse didn't have anything that could more than dent Maria, but in turn. Mousse was so fast and quick in the air and the ground that he could keep away from her. This left Gea and Diodora facing off against Rias, Rika and the priests.

Meanwhile, Rika had shifted from her shotgun, the various gas, smoke and explosive rounds not having matter much, although Gea was missing an arm by this point. The hypnosis spell on her though kept Diodora's queen fighting even one handed, and a blast of magic from

her nearly hit the second younger priest and another finally caught Mousse, smashing the duck out of the sky, letting Maria charge back to the main battle.

Diodora's trick had worked, and lashed out again with several spells before the priests could toss out more shield talismans. This time, he finally hit one of the defending priests, who went down with a cry of pain as his leg was nearly amputated. The chief priest also hissed in pain the next second as, once more dodging a blast from Rias, a conjured spike of stone nearly slammed into the man, hitting him a glance blow that twisted him that was enough to break bones despite his combat robes, whatever defenses they had not up to fighting a devil of Diodora's power.

Before he could finish the old man off, Diodora had to duck his head to one side automatically as a sanctified bullet raced through wearers had been before. *Huh, that might not have hurt much, but it would've distracted, fuck it already did!*

Before Diodora could dodge again, Rias's kick slammed into his back, sending him forward. Then even as he turned around, a punch hammered into his face, sending him sideways.

"Give it up Diodora! I don't want to kill you, I just want to beat on you a little." Rias growled, her Power of Destruction flaring around her hands. With Diodora reeling, he was in no position to defend his two remaining followers, and a single pinpoint blast finished off Gea before another removed the top of Maria's metal head from her shoulders. "I could just as easily have taken your head off with Power of Destruction just then. Your entire peerage is down. This fight is over."

"You really don't think that's going to work, do you?" Rika muttered, wincing as she raised her two former exorcist guns again. "I can't remember a single instance where calling for someone to put the gun down ever worked for the SAT."

"No, I don't think so. I just really don't want to start the political shitstorm killing him will start off," Rias answered, keeping her eyes on Diodora. "I might not care much about my clan's political aspirations, but I do care about my brother and his position. Killing another heir is not something that should be done lightly. Maiming though, that is another thing entirely."

Pushing himself upright, Diodora scowled, looking around him. *Damn it all! Losing my entire peerage is going to sting, but I went into this knowing I might lose them. If I have Asia, I will be satisfied. The new is always better than the old. But now... I need to kill Rias, don't I?* The thought was liberating, as the only way he would be able to explain this to his family was if there was no one else's story to contradict whatever he came up with. If that happened, he could still remain with his family. If not, Diodora knew he'd be forced to run to the Khaos Brigade. And since his main worth to them was as a spy, Diodora didn't know what his reception there would be like.

With that thought, and his own desires and fury fueling him, Diodora decided to set aside the warning he been given about not using his 'Blessing' from Ophis except in life or death situations. *I will have Asia, and I will kill everyone here! They will pay for this humiliation.*

"I think not" Diodora ground out, before reaching up to touch his neck, right behind one of his ears. There a small tattoo sat, made to look like an undulating eastern dragon hidden by his ear from any but the smallest scrutiny. As he touched it, the tattoo lit up, glowing dark green. The scales spread out rapidly to cover half of his face for a second, before an aura of greenish energy erupted into a spiral around him, looking for all the world like a Chinese dragon made out of magic before disappearing inside of him.

"What is that?" Rias muttered, before her eyes widened as Diodora seemed to disappear for a second. It took her a moment her eyes a moment to adjust, but by that point, his fist had slammed hard into Rika's stomach. Blood burst out from the policewoman's mouth as she was sent hurtling backward, slamming into the chief priest with enough force to slam the both of them in turn into the wall behind the man with sufficient momentum to shatter the wall and bury them inside the house out of sight somewhere.

A blast of magic overcame Rias's shield in the next moment, and she screamed as the magic fire flared over her body, forcing her to stop and roll the ground trying desperately to put it out.

Laughing wildly, Diodora marched forward towards Rias. "Hahah, yes, yes!! This power is truly amazing! No wonder SHE thought that I would be up to that little task. Killing you it's like swatting a bug now!"

The sole remaining priest stepped in front of Rias, lashing out at the man with two talismans he had been hastily writing on for a few moments. The ward he'd created against evil caused Diodora to rebound off of it and away from Rias for second, letting Rias lash out with the Power of Destruction that slammed into the man with as much power as she could put behind the spell.

It should have disintegrated Diodora's upper body from the waist up. Instead, that greenish aura flashed into being again. The green energy dragon spiral absorbed her attack, causing Rias' eyes to widen in shock. "What, what is that?!"

"This is my final card to play. My final recourse. Your damned Power of Destruction and the defenses here forced my hand," Diodora growled from behind the spiraling energy shield. "I was willing to let you leave, Gremory. But now, you've all cost me too much, far too much for me to cover up, so the only recourse is scorched earth. None of you will..."⁷⁹

He paused as Asia appeared out of the hole that Rika and the head priest's bodies had made. In her hand she held a dozen talisman, which she hurled up into the air. They adhered to every object around her, and then activated all at once.

As they did, Rias twitched away as they seem to activate, creating a yellowish glow around the main temple building. The effect of so many evil-banishing talisman was giving off so much magic that it bothered her despite the fact that the attack from Diodora had hurled her away from her previous position near the temple.

Closer to the temple, Diodora hissed in fury, backing away rapidly. "This will not save you, Asia-chan! It will only make me harsher on you when I get my hands on you!"

Asia stared back at him for a second before turning away to kneel beside Rika. Twilight Healing appeared on her fingers, as Rias attacked Diodora again, only to have her attack be absorbed once more.

None of the people around the temple saw something smash into the locked lid of the small well at the back of the temple property. No one saw a small hand reaching up out of the well. This was followed by a second, and a quite familiar blonde head poking up. "Well, we made it. I... OOOOP!"

Shizuka found herself propelled out of the well, smacking chest first into the ground. "Honestly, Shizuka, don't just hang there," Saeko grumbled, pulling herself up and over the well nimbly. "Even with my... what is that noise?"

"I don't know," Shizuka said, looking confused. She was the most recent inductee to the strange and unusual world of the mystical side of life, and hadn't even been very near the fight down at the beach.

On the other hand, Saeko had heard the Power of Destruction at work before. That was what she was hearing, that and something else too. *Some other magic users. Well, unless we've teleported to the Underworld somehow, and I doubt that, we're still in Hakata, and Rias is fighting someone. Interesting. Perhaps even enlightening.*

Her hand gripping the blade she had strapped to her waist, Saeko motioned Shizuka to stay where she was. "Stay here until I or someone else comes to get you. It sounds as if something fun is going on."

Whatever reply Shizuka made did not register to Saeko as she raced forward, racing around the temple toward the front noting the damage done to it, seeing a flash of energy in a window or two before she was at the front of the temple. She took in what was going on at a glance, and then attacked instantly.

By the time Saeko had arrived, Diodora had broken one of Rias' legs with a lucky blow from his Ophis-empowered magic. She had tried to fight back, but his automatic defense simply absorbed Rias' Power of Destruction, her control over that power not enough to blast through the 'blessing' Diodora was using.

Standing over the body of his former enemy, Diodora had barely a second to register Saeko's presence and with instincts flaring he teleported away. Popping back into existence several feet away from where he had been a moment before, Diodora stared at the woman who had suddenly seemingly appeared in a flash of lightning, her blade up and cutting where his neck had been.

Saeko was wet, and not, up until this moment in the fun way. Despite her rising arousal at the thought of the fight to come, she was sore, still dressed in her swimsuit, and was covered with small bruises from the various traps that she hadn't been entirely able to dodge. Yet despite all that, lightning still flared around the blade from her hands, and from her eyes as she gazed at Diodora, a feral expression of delight crossing her features.

"I remember you from yesterday. So, that attack on us was indeed launched by you, as Rias supposed and you even came back for seconds. How nice. Thank you for volunteering to be my test subject for this." Saeko held up her blade lightly.

Blearily, Rias gazed at the blade they had come here to find, the Shinrai no Ha. *It, it doesn't quite match the picture I found, but it's got to be!* The o-dachi was actually a bit longer than in the picture, and the notch near the tip was smaller. The tsuba was also much larger, covering Saeko's hand and then some. "Sae-chan..."

"Indeed. Just lay there for a moment, Rias-chan. I'm certain Asia will be able to heal you once I get rid of this one." Saeko crouched, holding it to one side as if she was going to do a quick draw attack, despite the crackling blade not having any sheathe. "Pray, try not to be sliced into Sashimi too fast," she taunted, before launching herself forward.

End Chapter

This chapter focused on Ranma and Vali, and the initial fight between Rias and co vs. Diodora. The next will show Diodora vs. Saeko, while Neko-Ranma continues to cause issues. Till next time folks, and Ranma fans, be on the lookout for the Ranma poll for February. It will be out Wednesday and last until the 15th.