

Hey all, this was the Ranma poll winner over *Effect of a Horse and a Dragon*. It would have won even without the carry-over effect in the poll, which means next month will be Stallion versus *Effect*. Could be interesting...

Anyway, this has been edited by Hiryo and me with Grammarly.

Chapter 19: Spelunking Into Danger

As Ranma raced back along the water line back towards where she had left Saeko and the others to where she left the others. At one point Ranma nearly lost her footing, her mouth gaping open as she stared ahead of her at a woman who had just skirted the edge of the water and raced towards an alleyway with another woman hot on her heels. "What the hell? Was that woman naked? Damn, even I have more feminine modesty than that," the redhead muttered, before thinking about it, then admitting, "Well, nowadays, anyway. Not when I first got my curse." Then Ranma's eyes widened in horror. "FUCK! Does that mean instead of the local demons, it's Happosai making trouble!? He likes swimsuits just as much as underwear."

Shuddering at the memory of one incident with the ancient pervert that, ironically, occurred at the same beach where Ranma had earned the Phoenix Pill from Cologne, Ranma continued on. *Never been chased by so many angry girls in my life*, Ranma lamented. *And I was one at the time, too!*

Within moments, Ranma saw what looked like smoke ahead, billowing up from something or other hidden behind a few dozen people and beach paraphernalia. "Crap, and Happy's throwing around Hapoo Daikarin now?"

Fully convinced that the ancient pervert had somehow tracked them down, Ranma leaped up over the crowd. Her feet lightly touched down on this or that head as she raced forward, as well as a few faces. Although she resolutely ignored the one person who shouted, "Oh yes, step on me, mistress!" as she went.

There was also a lot of screaming and shouting going on, which grew as she continued to Anything Goes Crowd Surf until she landed in an open area in, where the source of those screaming voices was easily apparent in the form of several bodies that lay across the area, heads gone from headshots, throats open, or run through. Ranma quickly took it in, the damage to a few buildings that looked like they had been splashed with blood or cut in various places, the boardwalk itself having a few holes in it, and finally, the shoreline area, where a man-sized segment of sand had been turned into glass from some kind of intense heat. All of that told Ranma that there had indeed been a fight here, one that had probably started in a devil's dimensional bubble before spilling out. *Dead women and no sign of an old pervert, I guess I was wrong.*

More importantly, though, Asia and the others were all in one piece. Saeko and Mousse looked a little bruised around the edges but were both in one piece, even if Saeko's clothing had seen better days. As for Asia, her knees looked a bit scuffed, but that was all.

Moving up behind Asia, Ranma picked her up, ignoring her squeak, hugging the stuffing out of her before lightly depositing Asia back on her feet as the redhead began to ramble in relief, looking Asia over for any serious injuries. "I am so sorry, Asia! What the heck happened here? I am so sorry I missed it. Copycat Ken was leading me away. Maybe he was part of this, I don't know. It isn't really his style to work with others, but if he did, and you were attacked again, and I wasn't here to..."

"Hush, you." That was as far as Ranma got before Saeko moved over, took the redhead's face in her hands, and pulled her up and into a deep kiss, complete with tongue. Ranma's eyes widened before they slowly closed, and the currently redheaded martial artist's eyes slowly closed as she leaned into the kiss.

Asia stared for a few seconds before she quickly turned away, a blush on her face. Concentrating on scanning the crowd of onlookers for anyone who had been hurt after the dimensional bubble had popped. Doing so, she noted several people down by the water line, near where the last fireball the attackers had used to cover their escape. Many looked about as red as lobsters from being close to the fireball or the steam it had created. Others looked even worse off and moaned in pain as they were pulled out of the water by others, their skin blistered from the sudden increase in heat.

Instantly, the young nun moved in their direction, Twilight Healing appearing on her fingers as she did. "Er, excuse me, but could anyone who is injured please come over here? I, er, I'm not going to harm you," she went on, flinching a bit as the injured and those around them stared at the foreign girl. "I just want to help."

Mousse, also going a little red at the immensely sexy site of two girls kissing, moved to her side, shaking his head as he began a mantra in his head. *He's a boy, and my rival, he's a boy, and my rival, he/she can't be hot even in female form. Even dressed up in a swimsuit and kissing another hot girl. Damn it, for the first time since Asia did it, I am really sad she healed my eyes!*

Thankfully (depending on who you asked) the seriousness of some of the injuries and the wary looks Asia was getting helped to break Mousse out of his torpor. However, Rika beat him to it, walking to stand on Asia's other side as she pulled out her badge. "SAT Police here, folks. Let's get organized here! All injured, report to our healer. Any questions you have will be answered in due time, but wounded come first, then affidavits."

Although she wasn't a beat cop and had only been so for the six months it took her to finish SAT training and transfer, Rika knew how to do a few things that every policeman could. She could project authority, and Rika could make anything seem like it was normal and under

control. The Nothing to See Here, Move Along technique. Well, that and the typical Japanese propensity for following orders from those in authority.

Regardless, it worked. Barring a few who were staring at the two kissing girls and several who had pulled out phones and were taking videos of everything, the crowd around them generally began to calm down.

Behind her, Saeko pulled away from the kiss, smirking at the semi-glazed look the redhead had on her face at the moment. While she was not as open about it as Akeno was among her friends, Saeko was still a sadist. Instead of simply enjoying causing pain, she took immense delight in fighting, feeling the exultation and joy of overcoming her enemies and seeing their pain-filled faces as she proved herself. Thus, Saeko was feeling **immensely** horny after the fight she'd just had, and this time, she wasn't so out of it with euphoria and injury as she had during the battle against Kokabiel.

"None of that," Saeko whispered as their lips came apart, licking her lips as she stared down at her boy-turned-girlfriend. "You're not Asia's permanent protector, there are others who can step in when you are away for whatever reason, such as myself and Mousse. Nor do I think that she would ever be happy, if Asia ever felt she had become a burden on you."

Her smirk deepened as she turned Ranma around, to head towards where Rika had called a few of the bystanders forward, to 'question' as part of her attempt to control the crowd. Shizuka had already moved to help Asia, working to help calm the locals down further. Whether that was because of her general attitude or the fact that far too many men around them were busy staring at her chest was debatable. "Besides, if you were here, that would've meant less fun for me."

Rolling her eyes, Ranma nodded and then asked what had happened. Yet before Saeko could fully explain, both of them stiffened, turning to stare upwards to where the two devils were flying down quickly. One was a young man with green hair around Ranma's age. The other was a young woman, perhaps a little bit older or younger, with short-cropped dark brown hair. When she landed, Ranma could not see any expression on her face, while the man looked visibly agitated.

Before either martial artist could decide to attack, or Rika could grab up her gun again, the woman turned away from them, holding out her hand towards the nearest group of onlookers and injured. Their eyes became glazed as a strange multicolored light came from her hands, and the man nodded their way as he held his hand up into the sky. Another spell flashed from his hands, and Ranma watched as the spell flashed out, not towards the crouching Ranma or the others but around, almost like a dimensional bubble was passing over and through them, then out of sight. When it passed, Ranma straightened up from her crouch, glaring. "What the fuck was that?!"

“Stasis spell,” the green-haired man explained without preamble. “Anyone in the area who doesn’t have natural magical resistance is now frozen in time. It’s a modification of the dimensional bubble spell.”

At that, Ranma turned away, causing the green-haired youth to start, then scowl. Ranma and Saeko ignored him, moving towards Rika and Shizuka. A quick ki pulse into their bodies had both women wake up with a start, with Shizuka overbalancing and falling on her rear with an ‘eep’ as Rika instantly grabbed for one of her two exorcist-style pistols. “Who the fuck did that!?”

An eyebrow rising in some amusement, the green-haired man shook his head. “Diodora Astaroth. I would say at your service, this trouble wasn’t actually happening in my territory because of your presence, whoever you all are. And I hope that you aren’t going to do whatever it is you just did to release those two to everyone here? Although, why a woman armed with exorcist weapons doesn’t have her own magical resistance is beyond me. And... is that a human police badge? Interesting...”

What wasn’t so interesting to Diodora was that he couldn’t figure out what Ranma had done. While he was acting as if he was ignorant of the redhead, the rumors about Ranma’s strange curse had been part of the information Diodora had gathered about him and the events in Kuoh. He had not been prepared to see some kind of new energy flash from Ranma’s hands like that. It wasn’t magic, but what that left, he had no idea and that worried him.

“Name’s Ranma, and this is Rika, Saeko, Shizuka and Asia. The other guy’s Mousse. We’re here with Rias Gremory, and I honestly have no clue what happened here. I just arrived myself. Saeko, Mousse and Asia were attacked, although where Rika and Shizuka came into the fight, I don’t know. You’d be the local bigwig then?”

From one side, Saeko and Rika took all this in, with Rika slowly calming down, reaching down to help her girlfriend to her feet, while Saeko examined the two newcomers closely. Mousse was doing the same, having placed himself between Asia and the two Devils. Asia had noticed spells of the green-haired devil but had not turned from her work, using her Sacred Gear to heal one person at a time.

Diodora stiffened a little at the insouciant way Ranma spoke, shaking his head. “I am heir to the Astaroth Clan, which controls this city, and I will demand a **full** accounting of what has gone here. For now, I can tell that far too many people have already seen and begun to take videos of this incident. We need to start erasing people’s memories, and then the start erasing people’s phones and everything else...” his voice trailed off, as, as if by chance, he looked towards Asia, his eyes widening. “The Holy Maiden?”

Only as she was addressed did Asia look up from her work. Looking at the two devils, she blinked in surprise. “It’s you!”

"It is indeed," Diodora said, moving towards her, holding out his hand towards her which Asia hesitantly took. She blushed even more brightly than she had a few moments before when, instead of shaking her hand, Diodora bowed over it, kissing the back of her hand lightly. "I'm glad that you remember me. I certainly remember you. It isn't every day that a demon like me has his life saved by a holy maiden after all."

"Wait, what?" Ranma said, fighting the urge to get between the two of them as Asia seemed to blush and stammer a bit. *That sounds... oh, right, why she was excommunicated from the Church. I'd almost forgotten about that, what with all the approval Gabriel heaped on Asia-chan's head.*

"I, I only did what I thought was right, what the Holy Father would have wanted of me." At this point, Asia had gotten used to the fact that using the name God around devils hurt them and substituted a term for it easily. "Since then, I have not seen anything to sway me in that belief, and indeed, I have seen much that tells me that simply doing good is perhaps the greatest show of love to Him in heaven that I could accomplish."

Despite having learned that God was dead, Asia showed no hesitation in her statement and had not wavered in her faith. A part of that was meeting Gabriel and hearing from her what had happened to God. Yet most of it was simply Asia's faith and her desire to do good in God's name.

Taking her hand back from the man, Asia lifted that hand to touch her rosary, smiling warmly. "But it is good to see that you are fully recovered from your injuries. I was not certain that I had healed you sufficiently before you were forced to run away."

Diodora barely kept a scowl off his features as he took a slight step backward, the pure faith coming from Asia acting almost like a physical blow. Even holding her hand as she had made that statement had hurt like someone using the word God would in front of devils, only slightly more so. "I, um, I was able to get away from my pursuers and recover somewhat in the months since, although I still bear a scar from that wound. But do not doubt for a moment that you saved my life that day. Please, continue what you were doing healing these people, and myself and my rook and I will start erasing their memories."

Nodding, Asia turned back to what she was working on while Diodora turned to look at a suspicious Ranma, who now stood with Saeko and Rika. "Now, can you at least inform me what has been going on here? I received a report of something strange and unusual occurring down here, something magical, and then our online analysts noticed a sharp spike in videos showing what could only be magic or the occult."

"I don't know what happened back here, but what you just described sounds like my fight with Copycat Ken." Ranma waved that off, staring warily at Diodora. "But you have some explaining to do first. How do you know Asia, woke the wording you two talking about just now?"

"As the highest-ranking member of the Astaroth clan currently within this territory, I could demand an answer from you, but I suppose I can be the better man and be diplomatic if you're feeling high-strung, miss," the man said, shaking his head.

The green-haired devil took a very well-hidden moment of delight at the way Ranma's eyes flashed at being so addressed before continuing on smoothly, gesturing over to Asia as if to reach out and touch her shoulder but not doing so. "I also suppose that if you are Miss Argento's protector, I should show you some courtesy at that. My family had made an agreement with an artist who lived in Athens. But that individual then moved to be with his family in a small town in northern Italy. I went there to see if he wished to cancel the contract, only to discover that the man had a cousin who was an exorcist. An exorcist who, to my displeasure, had come over to help him move in. That exorcist attacked me when I was not in any way prepared, but I was able to get away. Miss Asia found me when I was heavily injured and healed me enough that I was able to get away from my pursuer."

Diodora smiled over at Asia, who was blushing a bit at his fulsome praise for her abilities and for a moment, the urge to take her, to claim this pure maiden, almost overcame all of Diodora's reason. *If I call upon the power that Ophis gave me, that must be enough to overcome this, this human!* The thought of doing so, of defiling someone who believed so strongly in the so-called Holy Father, was so intoxicating he could barely overcome the urge.

But Diodora did so, reminding himself that this human with the odd curse had beaten Kokabiel and had some very esoteric and strange abilities. *No, I refuse to try my luck against Ranma, not unless I can learn more about his strange skills. I tried to use my peerage to grab Asia while he was away for that very reason. My vices are important, but not as much as my life.*

Holding that thought in his mind, Diodora turned back to Ranma. "At any rate, that is how I know Miss Argento. But what happened here?"

Ranma shrugged, looking over at Saeko to explain. She was also watching Diodora but readily described how she, Mousse and Asia had been attacked, pointing back to where the battle had begun and then out to the ocean, where the last two attackers had retreated after having lost several people, when Rika had begun to fire at them from long range. That caused Diodora to look over at the woman before a call from the woman who had arrived with them drew his attention.

"Master, I have erased most of the memories of the people directly around us, but I am uncertain what to put in their stead or how far beyond this crowd we will need to go." She was currently standing beside Shizuka. For a moment, Diodora could not keep his eyes from staring for a moment. *Good God! I am not one to normally like huge tits, but those? I could use her as a human pillow!*

"Er, yes, Ahem, let us look around for something that could have exploded or otherwise done some kind of damage to the beach, Augusti," Diodora said. "If we cannot find it, we will

have to repair the beach and these buildings and simply replace their memories with something prosaic. There will be a bit more work, but it is certainly doable.”

Mousse frowned from where he was standing next to Asia, who was healing the last of the wounded bystanders. Looking over at Ranma, he jerked his head towards the green-haired man, who apparently was some local demon lord. “What is that about? Repairing damage and everything else is nice, but erasing memories?” Mousse hadn’t actually seen that in practice yet and he didn’t like the idea.

For her part, Rika also was frowning, although not at the idea of erasing people’s memories. She’d had time to get used to that idea and understood why Demons, Fallen and the Church believed that normal people couldn’t handle the fact that magic existed. No, it was something about the way that Diodora had looked at Asia for a moment and the way he seemed to have taken everything that Saeko had said about the attack in stride. *Why isn’t he asking any questions? He just... listened. Asked what the attackers wore, and that’s it. Why?*

Ranma explained, and Diodora turned away from his rook to glare at her and the others. “Well, what are you lot waiting for? Get to work erasing memories, people!”

“We don’t have spells like that,” Ranma said, shaking his head. *I might be able to pull it off although it’s doubtful I could do it on command, and what could be the point?* He smirked lackadaisically over at Saeko, miming holding up something in his hand. “Although, maybe we could figure out some kind of scientific way of doing it? Ladies and gentlemen, would you just look at the glowing pen for a moment, please.”

Saeko and Rika got the joke and both snickered, while Diodora became annoyed. Something about Ranma’s smirk was acting like a whip on his self-control, wearing away at it like being around Asia but without the delicious lust and desire to break her, merely causing him to become angry. “W... then... then how in the world have you all kept people from realizing that you use magic?!”

“In Nerima, there was no need for them. After all, where in the heck would you draw the line? After all...” Ranma began before Mousse and Asia joined in, chuckling and giggling as they did. Even Asia had heard this phrase several times during her stay with the Tendos in Nerima. “Because we’re all weird here!”

OOOOOOO

In Kuoh, Kasumi sneezed, shaking her head as Nodoka did the same beside her. “Ara, I wonder what that was about?”

“Someone talking about the pair of us? Fufufu, perhaps some of those young men who were looking our way when we were walking away from the real estate office this afternoon?” Nodoka said with a light laugh, waggling her eyebrows outrageously. “I realized you didn’t think

they were all that interesting, but the opposite certainly was not true. Why, I even noticed a few of them looking my way, which did excellent things for my self-esteem.”

Kasumi shook her head at that, grateful that the woman wasn't trying to hook somebody up with her, simply joking, and decided not to address that idea right now, turning her attention back to what they had been talking about. “At any rate, I realized that you wanted to find a larger place, but why so large? You quite surprised me when you said it had to have a minimum of five rooms.”

Similarly pushing aside the moment of amusement, Nodoka shook her head, becoming serious. “I realize that at the moment, Rias, Akeno and the others have decided to continue living in the house they are in currently, despite the fact that it was bought for them by her parents. But I think that eventually, at least the two older girls will want to move away from it. Perhaps over the summer..?” Nodoka shrugged. “And when they do, they will want to move in. I quite approve of Saeko, but the more, the merrier when it comes to getting grandchildren, and I can guarantee that Akeno will become just as enamored of my manly son as Rias had.”

Kasumi sweatdropped a bit, wanting to point out that perhaps Nodoka should speak to her son about that first, as it seemed as if two women were more than enough for Ranma. Or that perhaps Rias wanted to be independent, get her own place along with her peerage rather than live with anyone else, let alone a parental figure like Nodoka. *A very unconventional one, to be sure, but still a somewhat pushy parent. At least I know Rias-chan and the others don't see me like a parent, as Nabiki, Akane, and my own father did back home. Ugh.*

There was something else wrong with what Nodoka had said, though, and when Kasumi spoke, she addressed that rather than her own internal thoughts. “Actually, I think Koneko might be more interested in Ranma than Akeno. Never doubt the power of an onii-chan/imouto pair,” she pointed out with a laugh.

“Ohohoh, would that work for you?” Nodoka teased. “A little boy calling you onee-chan? Or perhaps an older man you could call ‘big brother? Somewhat like the good doctor back in Nerima? Only with far more in the way of spine, of course.”

Kasumi blinked at that, then rolled her eyes, utterly fed up with that particular misconception. “Honestly! Why is it that everyone, even my sisters and my father, seemed to think I was interested in Doctor Tofu? I don't understand that at all. The man could barely finish a complete sentence in front of me most of the time without making jokes or dancing around with that skeleton of his, and while somewhat handsome, we really did not have much in common.”

“Wait, you weren't?” Now it was Nodoka's turn to blink, surprise visible in her expression. “But then, why did everyone think you were? From what Akane told me, you always took food over for him, were always reading his books and even laundered his clothing

occasionally. Even Nabiki thought you were interested in him, or else why would you put up with his antics?"

"And is Akane a good source on what is and is not romantic?" Kasumi rejoined archly, causing Nodoka's lips to twitch in an acknowledging smile. "The books, I suppose you might show some interest in nursing on my part, true. It was a phase, as I always enjoyed taking care of children more than anything else."

"As for the rest? Tofu Ono was a single man living on his own, and sharing food with him and cleaning his clothing kept the bills from Akane and Ranma's frequent visits to his clinic down," Kasumi said as if it was the most obvious thing in the world. "I was never interested in him as a man. That would've been so wrong, and not just because of the age gap between us. Good grief, he was the doctor I went to with Nabiki and Akane to help explain about periods because I, for certain, had no desire to do it. Do you honestly think my father of all people would have been any help there?"

"Ah, That... that makes some sense." Nodoka smiled, then wagged her eyebrows once more at Kasumi. "So, who would be your type, Kasumi-chan?"

"Someone a little older than me, I think, just a little, not a lot like Doctor Tofu. Someone who can provide... perhaps?" Kasumi shrugged unconcerned. "I am not very interested in romance, really. I have not met anyone in person that I find attractive, although I will say that I prefer someone who is able to look after themselves and is respectful."

"Hmm..." Nodoka was tempted to push but decided against it. "Well, I will take you at your word then. About that, anyway, not about who could be interested in my son, of course. Koneko is indeed in little sister territory, and I rather think that Ranma will never look at her as anything different."

"And I do not think that he has looked at Akeno in any kind of romantic manner," Kasumi argued. "She might be interested in him, but that too is doubtful. I have not seen any of their interactions be more than teasing on Akeno's part, and judging by her personality, she does that to everyone. Whereas Koneko and Ranma have already had a few moments which could be called romantic, and she has evinced some interest in him too." *Albeit under the impact of whatever kind of super-catnip Grandfather used on her, but still, the point stands.*

"Hmm... then how about a friendly little wager?" Nodoka smirked, showing that her son might have gotten more from her than just his full head of hair.

Elsewhere in Kuoh, Akeno and Koneko shivered as they and Kiba waited in the Occult Research. Kiba looked at the two girls, his brows furrowed. "Are the two of you cold?"

Both of them shook their head, wondering what that was about but becoming serious as the teleportation circle in the floor lit up, not with the normal Gremory sigil but with one of its

allied clans. Many would say this clan was the senior of the pair, the one that had gifted Lucifer, Rias and Millicas the Power of Destruction, the Bael clan. Others pointed out how it was the height of irony that the individual who was seen as the heir to the Bael Clan did not have the power that the Bael Clan was justly famous for.

Not that it had seemingly slowed him down much. Sairaorg Bael was known as the strongest rookie, the strongest of their generation among devil kind, for a reason.

The man who appeared a moment later was tall, with dark blue-black hair and shoulders wider than even most of the fallen angels that had made up Kokabiel's legion. He currently wore typical college student clothing, but it seemed barely to fit his frame, which bulged with muscles. His face was square-jawed, with his eyes just a bit too deep-set to be attractive. All in all, he looked like a young but very well-to-do boxer.

Given Sairaorg's size and imposing looks, he might well have been imposing to most, but the large smile of greeting on his face gave away the lie. Even Koneko smiled, if in her own way, in return and Akeno curtsied, smiling in welcome, more friendly than formal despite her more formal words. "Lord Sairaorg Bael, it is good to see you. As the senior representative of my King, Rias Gremory, I formally hand over all of the Gremory Clan's control of this town to you and place myself at your command until such time as you no longer need our insight."

"And I, as Sairaorg Bael, do take over partial control of the Kuoh Territory in the name of the Bael Clan." With that, Sairaorg let out a laugh, "Hah! So formal! Still, I expected my little cousin to be here to greet me. I assume she's off doing something more important to her personally, right, now that she's free of all this heir nonsense. She told me that Ranma would be out on a trip, just never mentioned she would be out with him."

Now, while Koneko and Kiba's eyes widened, and she knew Rias would want to keep the two battle junkies away from one another, Akeno saw no problem with letting them meet. Indeed, watching the two handsome, brawny men beating on one another would be almost as fun as teasing Rias. "Mah, well, if you want to meet Ranma, I think we can arrange that as soon as the two of them and their other companions return to Kuoh..."

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Back in Hakata, Rias was currently rushing through the area of control that a powerful devil had apparently set up around the beach to knock out everyone who didn't have magical resistance. *I have to assume that's one of the local lords. Here's hoping that it isn't a Pillar Clan or someone from the Young Devils. I sooo do not need that kind of a headache right now. At least Rika had at least texted me after the battle was over. Mousse and Asia apparently hadn't thought about it, although Rika's message hadn't really told her much. Just 'our prediction was right, but it's been handled' and a pin drop on Google Maps. Honestly! Why do I think that I need to sit all of these so-called humans down and explain their own technology to them! It's*

like they're all the equivalent of Koneko when it comes to communicating via phone! Ranma's got an excuse. Rika and Saeko don't!

Thankfully, she had already been finished with her discussion with the monk by that time. Linfai Shinra was the first ascetic she had ever met, and he had been happy to answer some of her questions in return for gaining answers of his own and some well-made tea, not once trying to ogle Rias or talk down to her or treat her more than slightly warily. He had indeed known about what he called the Blade of Raijin. "But none of the temples we of the Shinra maintain here in Hakata can say we own it. Indeed, it is doubtful that anyone could say they own the Blade of Raijin with truth on their lips. Only those worthy can pass the tests to even discover the blade. And according to what little we know of the Blade of Raijin, those tests do not stop when you find its resting place. One must have purity of purpose to wield the sword."

That could mean a lot of things, Rias reflected now. The old man had brought up the idea of purity several times, the definition of which, as she had discovered in her research, could change with how the individual who created the ward wished to be. He asked Rias several questions about the magic of devil-kind in turn, which she had answered readily enough, getting some answers on her own about the spiritual magic that Linfai and others like him practiced. Nevertheless, it had led to a bit of confusion on her part.

"Wait, but if that's the case, why then did I learn about the Shinrai no Ha because of records left from a time when a demon, a member of clan Lucifer, wielding it?" Rias chuckled a bit, shaking her head. "Surely you're not suggesting that a demon believed in the Shinto faith."

"You're making the mistake of considering a shadow as the reality," Linfai had said in reply. "Do you think that no one has tried to recreate the power of the Blade of Raijin?" He watched as Rias frowned, shaking his head in turn. "I know of the demon you speak of. Drali, yes? I have read of him. He actually was here in this city centuries ago when we were but a small fishing town. I know not how he did so, but the monks at the time were clear: what he wielded was a shadow, a mere facsimile."

"I don't know anything to gainsay that, though I must say it sounds strange." *I am also wondering why you keep using the term shadow. And the power of the blade described in our records was enough to make a minor demon like Drali dangerous to mid-to-high level fallen and devils alike... Where could he have gotten the power necessary to fake that or forge a blade that could contain that power in reality? Strange... although with magic... I wonder if the Shinrai no Ha could have been somehow copied and broken up? I know that Vritra, the dragon that gave Saji his Sacred Gear, was broken into different pieces.*

"It is indeed. The original has stayed where it was hidden all these years, for never has a worthy one discovered it," Linfai answered, unaware of Rias' inner thoughts.

Rias stared at the old man over her teacup for a moment, calmly sipping at it. "And you would not be willing to tell me even that if you thought that I had any chance of gaining the real blade, would you?"

"Perhaps, perhaps not. Perhaps those who search for the blade are not the only ones that can be tested. You already passed one such test, which surprised me, I will admit." At Rias' look of confusion, Linfai chuckled explaining about the outer ward around his temple.

This caused Rias to blink, then slowly nodded thoughtfully. She was not about to call herself a very virtuous person, but she had to admit in comparison to most devils, she probably did come off as one. *Frankly, the only sin I will hold my hand up to is lust and perhaps a touch of gluttony for things that I like. But no more so than normal humans, I would think.* "More about how that works?"

At that point, the conversation had been derailed when it came to the Shinrai no Ha, but it had still been fascinating to the redhead.

Now, as she came within sight of yes, Ranma, her other friends and two devils, she wondered if perhaps introducing Asia to the old man could be interesting. Whether or not Asia could start to learn some of the magic that he and his fellows used. Although it probably would be quite difficult for Asia to use anything but the warding techniques, as most of the spells Linfai described rely on the faith and belief of the individual using them. *Then again, perhaps not. Asia has some hidden depths to her. Well, at least I will go through with his request that I mention him to Tsubaki.*

And I wonder how Akeno or any of the other devils I know would have reacted to that little trick Linfai told me about as he showed me out. The Ma ward. He told me it would've been immensely painful if I had ever leaned into my devil urges like so many do... and fuck! That's Diodora Astaroth. Rias had seen him at several balls and other functions over the years, although she had never spoken with Diodora before. *Diplomatic face on then. Damn it. And, of course, he and Ranma look like they're about to throw down. The fact they haven't yet gives me some hope, though.*

Landing on the sands, Rias bowed politely towards Diodora. "Heir Astaroth. I apologize, I don't know what exactly is going on here, as the message from my acquaintances who told me to rush here didn't really tell me anything, but I am almost certain that Ranma here is making it worse."

"OY! Not nice!" Ranma muttered.

"Did Diodora here introduce himself as the local representative of the Astaroth clan, which rules this area?" Rias barely let Diodora nod before going on, crossing her arms under her chest, which did fascinating things to said chest, something that Ranma very carefully did not

try to notice at the moment. "And were you, in fact, arguing with him right now? I know you, Ranma! Remember, we're not here to cause trouble."

"What exactly are you here for anyway?" Diodora asked, somewhat mollified by Rias' words, which cut through the anger he had been feeling a moment before. Ranma had been arguing with him about whether or not it was his clan's fault they were attacked (it was, of course, but he wasn't about to admit it had been his peerage that was behind that attack) and had some duty to pay Saeko and the rest back, and how erasing everyone's memories was pointless and stupid.

Thankfully (again, depending on who you asked), Rias being here cut into Diodora's anger, letting his self-control come back to the fore. *I might be able to possibly defeat Ranma, but not Ranma and Rias together. Whatever strange power Ranma had that allowed him to fight Kokabiel combined with the Power of Destruction? No, thank you. I rather think I need to be alive to partake of the pleasure of breaking Asia as I so wish.*

"We're here for me. I learned recently that my queen can use some interesting abilities based on the old Shinto faith, and I decided to come and research some here on the words of Heiress Sitri's Queen. Akeno, unfortunately, could not come with me, as she had prior duties, but Ranma, Saeko, and the others could, as they also wish to learn some of the Shinto-style magic," Rias explained quickly and very briefly, lying through her teeth. She in no way wanted the Astaroth Clan to know that there could be a weapon of power equal to a Sacred Gear in their clan territory. If they learned of that, they might well try to press her and the others to give it up, and through her family, to the point that her brother might have to get involved. If he did, he wouldn't be able to rule against her without coming under fire for favoritism, something he had been very careful to not allow before this, unwilling to let his position be weakened by such attacks.

To Rias' relief, Diodora took that at face value, knowing all too well about the two Shinto temples within Hakata, cursing the fact that her family had made an agreement to let them in place in return for access to some of their wards, three a year since then. It had helped make the Astaroth holdings some of the most secure, something that Diodora had taken advantage of several times during his less-than-legal dealings with the Khaos Brigade, but now he was wondering if it was worth it. *On the one hand, it is why Asia-chan has almost literally fallen into my lap. On the other hand, my peerage was devastated by her defenders, and I may be forced to watch her walk right back, Maou curse it!*

"Nonetheless, while I realize that you had no idea that my clan held territory here, causing trouble like this is beyond the pale!" Diodora went on the attack quickly, trying to pin all the trouble on Ranma and the others. Yet swiftly, he was forced to concede he had no idea of where their attackers had come from. Put on the back foot like that, both he and Rias were forced to concede one another's points, which both of them had known almost instantly, although Diodora at least got the last word in.

“Very well. I will admit that this all-women peerage was indeed operating within our territory without my clan’s knowledge if you admit that they were after your acquaintances. While I in no way wish to condone anyone attacking Miss Argento and think the very idea is abhorrent, I also think I can safely say within five minutes of talking to her that the pigtailed fellow gives anyone a reason to do so with her.”

“It’s my winning personality,” Ranma drawled, snorting.

“Not helping Ranma,” Rias grumbled. “I also agree with you, Heir Astaroth. We can talk about some form of monetary remuneration after we have modified everyone’s memories that witnessed the battle here and Ranma’s battle with Copycat Ken. Although, that brings up the question of what Copycat Ken was doing here,” Rias launched her last attack at the moment when Diodora had thought he’d at least earned a tie, smiling thinly. “Judging from the rumors that we heard within the first few hours of arrival in the city, he has probably been operating here for quite some time, unlike the invading peerage that attacked Asia and the others. Yet seemed to work with them, leading Ranma away from Asia to allow the others to attack him.”

Diodora’s jaw clenched, and inwardly, he cursed. *Damn it, of course someone educated in devil politics will have seen that.* “Seeing such collusion in a random event is somewhat silly, I feel. But I will indulge you at least in one area. Augusti, is this Copycat Ken fellow one of my clan’s clients?”

Rias let a small frown appear on her face for just a moment before wiping it away. *Calm down Rias, that kind of addresses perfectly normal. Only your own family is known for treating your peerage as part of the family. And it’s not as if that means your family is without fault, remember?*

The rook held up a magical notepad, flicking through it until she found his name. “Yes, sir. Additional abilities with his transformation powers, in return for harvesting a bit of magical energy off Copycat Ken and everyone affected by the transformation in question. He has been your clan’s client for at least a year and a half.”

Ranma reflected that probably meant he had become the client of this devil clan a few months after leaving Nerima if that. *Maybe as little as a week or so. Huh, did he need them to help him get over that schizo-mode of his he fell into when he tried to beat me?*

“If this Ken fellow’s been a devil client for a year and a half, he should know better than to-” Rias began before Diodora held up a hand.

“True. It appears as if our client is at least partially to blame for the widespread nature of this incident, although again, I say there is no way to know if he was in cahoots with these harlots who attacked Miss Argento. That only leaves apprehending him and questioning this shape changer on his part in everything.” Both former heiress and current heir turned to Ranma, cocking their heads interrogatively at him. “Where is he?”

"Where I left him I suppose, unconscious about ten minutes that way for me at a run," Ranma explained, pointing down the shoreline.

"Wait, you just left him there after beating him up!?" Diodora said incredulously, and with some amusement carefully hidden behind his official façade. That was quite hilarious, frankly.

"It's not like I left the guy able to walk off on his own power," Ranma retorted. "And carrying him back would've slowed me down when I was worried about whether or not something might be happening to Asia and the others. Mainly because I was reminded that you and your clan would be in the area," she continued without any shame whatsoever.

Diodora rolled his eyes at that, then waved off Ranma. "Well, in that case, I suggest you go and get him. I can only hope that the stasis spell I threw up encompasses the area where he was left as well."

"Probably not," Rias sighed, shaking her head. "We're going to be at this for a while, I'm afraid, and I'd best get to it. Ranma, show me where you left this Copycat Ken fellow. The rest of us will follow you. I really wish I had brought some more of my peerage along who actually know how to modify memories at the moment."

"I as well. Most of my peerages are busy with various duties down in the underworld. But I can at least call on some of my cousins to come up and help for a bit," Diodora said before smiling in as warm and effusive a manner he could towards Asia. "Miss Argento, I do hope that as you stay in the city for a while, the two of us can perhaps meet up again. I still believe I owe you quite a bit for how you saved my life and would love the opportunity to do so."

"Oh, um, I suppose that you could maybe show us around or something? Although I do not believe that you need to owe me anything. While being expelled from the church wasn't fun at all, how everything has turned out since is something I can't exactly complain about. I have been able to achieve something of a dream of mine, making friends, going to school like a normal person, and even gaining a family!" Asia replied, smiling brightly. "Surely, this is all part of the Holy Father's plans for me."

She did not mention meeting Gabriel there, although her meeting Asia and commiserating with her had solidified Asia's faith to a level she hadn't felt since being forced out of the Church in Rome. To hear Gabriel, an **archangel**, say that she felt Asia was a pure soul and that she took joy in hearing Asia's prayers had buoyed her to an amazing degree.

Diodora was almost repulsed by the amount of sheer goodness and faith that Asia radiated, but the desire to break that faith still attracted him even more than Asia's faith repulsed him. Such was the way a devil who had given into his sins thought and believed. Hence, even though Asia didn't seem to realize what Diodora had meant he continued. "Well, I would be more than happy to show you, Rias, and your... companions around," Diodora felt he

was allowed the glare he sent Ranma's way before turning back to Asia, smiling happily. "But I was more interested in spending time with you personally."

"That almost sounds as if you're asking our Asia out on a date," Saeko said, coming up behind Asia and pulling her into a gentle hug from behind.

"That is indeed what I am doing," Diodora laughed. "After all, what individual would not want to get to know his or her savior? And if something romantic comes from it, well, that would be a story worth a song, wouldn't it?"

Asia blushed rosily at that, but Ranma shook his head, ruffling her hair a bit before turning to snort at Diodora. "You're going out of order my guy. Before you go on a date with someone's little sister, you gotta pass the big brother test, you know?"

At that, Asia's blush disappeared into a happier smile, with just a tiny bit of smugness to it. *Take that, Koneko!*

"In that case, I look forward to getting to know all of you, perhaps when you're not feeling so antagonistic toward me," Diodora said, putting all the blame for the argument that he and Ranma had been locked in on Ranma's shoulders with the ease of a politician. "Until then, I think we've all got our jobs to do."

He and Rias bowed formally to one another, and then he turned away to join Augusti going through the crowd nearby, flipping open a phone and dialing up a number to call some of his family members up to help.

At the same time, Ranma led the others away, with Saeko keeping an arm around Asia's shoulders.

Diodora was not actually calling his family. He doubted Ranma and the others truly believed his hands were clean, but their own hands were tied in terms of what to do about him in turn. As long as they were in Astaroth territory, that would be the case. As long as they were here, Diodora would push his luck still further. *But to do that, I need to remove That human and his odd abilities at the very least. And I know one combat junky who would always be up for a challenge.*

"Gea," he growled into the phone. "If you are thoroughly recovered from your **insanely bad** showing against a group of humans, I have a task for you. You will need to pass a message along the clandestine line to our 'untidy' allies. I have a target that might intrigue a certain ramen-loving silver-haired fellow."

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Diodora was absolutely correct. Except for Asia, not a single member of Ranma's group believed his appearance of innocence. "Well, he certainly seems to talk a good game," Ranma muttered as soon as they had pushed through the immediate crowd that Diodora and his rook would be handling. "But I didn't believe a word that came out of his mouth. To start with, he expected that whole having met Asia before thing to make me less suspicious of him? Really?"

"I have to wonder about the entire story," Rias agreed, not glancing over her shoulder to either Ranma or where the stasis field ended as she began to construct her own. "While I know that there are some clans that like to live dangerously and send solitary members into Italy or other nations where the church has a heavy presence, I hadn't heard of any Pillar Clan being so stupid as to actually send their heir apparent on such a foolish endeavor. Even if we set aside what happened to you all today, and I am in no way doing so, that whole story is suspicious.

"You're right on that. Saeko, did you notice he wasn't asking any questions about what the attackers looked like, only how they fought, where they came from or what their leader was like?"

Saeko shook her head at Rika's question. "No. He only asked where the attack began and what they were wearing."

"That's right. It's an old interrogator trick, ask for a small sliver of information and wait for the person you're questioning to fill in the rest. But the point is, he didn't seem interested in the actual fight. As if he **already** knew a lot, and was just making certain of the one thing he didn't already know, the clothing those attackers were wearing. As if that was the most important thing," the SAT officer explained.

"Yep," the heretofore silent nurse spoke up, gathering everyone's eyes to her bar Rias, who finished her spell, the stasis magic flowing out from her and covering the rest of the beach, completing the coverage that Diodora had only begun.

Shizuka smiled, shrugging her shoulders at everyone's moment of attention. "He was too poised, too calm and collected for someone who had just had a disaster of the level he was saying this all was on his lap. He should've been harried and annoyed, and he only got so when he was arguing with Ranma. He also didn't even ogle Rika or Saeko at all and only me once."

Ranma nodded sagely at that as did Mousse. Even the pair of them hadn't been able to stop themselves from looking at Shizuka more than a few times. Rika was a svelte, athletic beauty, made all the more so by her exotic skin color and dark purple hair, a trait that both men had a certain appreciation for. But Shizuka was the equivalent of a middle-aged beauty with curves for days despite having a thin waist to go with her pretty face and darn good rear.

"I think he also always had an eye on Asia from the moment he arrived," Mousse said, moving on quickly. "And I mean no offense to you, Healer, but that level of awareness is strange even in someone who might have a crush on his savior, as he tried to imply several times."

Asia pouted, shaking her head firmly. "I hope that you all are reading into it more than there is, but even if you weren't, I wouldn't be interested in Diodora in turn. I have no idea about his general character at all, and I certainly am not one to be turned by a pretty face."

"No, only pretty abs," Saeko whispered into her ear. This caused Asia to flush a bit, reminded of the fact that she had stared at Mousse, Ranma and the other boys when they had all gone to the beach together after the battle with Kokabiel's legion several times.

"So we go forward with the idea that Dio-aho's behind it, whatever he might be acting like." Ranma nodded her head firmly. *I like this whole preparing for trouble before it actually arrives thing, I might want to try it more often in the future.* "But was that the rest of his peerage which attacked you? Because without one, I don't get the impression that guy's going to stick his own neck out. He seems the schemy sort rather than the double down kind."

"Maybe, maybe not. Don't judge a book by its cover, Ranma," Rika gently admonished, shaking her head.

"Regardless, right now, Diodora's right. We need to modify everyone's memories who saw the fight, and you and your battle with Copycat Ken Ranma. I understand you think most of what you did will be explained away by—" Once more, Rias paused, staring at Ranma, who was suddenly looking quite shifty, and her eyes narrowed. "Ranma, is there anything you wish to share with the class?"

"Well, I said I beat Copycat Ken up, and we had a bit of a running fight across the beach. What I didn't say was that after I realized that the guy didn't have enough basic strength or speed to keep up with me if I really tried, I started to use it as a training spar."

Rias' eyes narrowed further, and she crossed her arms and began to tap a foot gently down on the boardwalk beneath them. "Why do I get the impression that when you say that, you don't mean that you tried out new martial arts moves on the poor man?"

Ranma began poking her two fingers together, looking away from the other redhead. "Because I wasn't. I was trying to use that connection with Jusenkyo, ya helped me figure out what I had. I think I got it to work. Not so much under control exactly, but in a usable form, anyway." Ranma brightened up, and her sheepish expression disappeared. "Really fun stuff, too. It'll be interesting to see what you all think of it later."

"Which does indeed mean that you probably left a trail of people who saw magic in action," Rias groaned. "A part of me is now hoping that Diodora was involved because if so, and he attacks us again in some way, we can just beat him up and be done with it. If not, causing that large a disturbance in another clan's territory would probably demand quite a **large** amount of money to smooth things over. And since I cut myself off from my parents, all that money will have to come from my own accounts."

She glared at Ranma, then coughed, turned away, and then reached over quickly, grabbing the other redhead's arm and dragging her along. "Come on, you might as well explain what you were doing as we go. It will make this far less tedious, at least for me."

The others followed after, with Mousse in particular listening evening intently to his former rival and current friend as he explained about his new abilities. Even now, despite the fact that they had fought more alongside one another several times, Mousse still wasn't certain which Ranma was, and frankly, it probably would come down to how Shampoo acted around Ranma the next time they were around.

Regardless, the abilities Ranma had created sounded appalling to deal with, and he said so. "Good God! You've found a magical style that is as varied and wildly unpredictable as my own Hidden Weapons Technique, only more so! Only you would ever think of barely coordinated wild magic that can create as many disparate effects as possible, Ranma."

"What can I say? It's just the next evolution of Anything Goes," Ranma snickered, shaking her head.

For her part, Saeko was a little conflicted. On the one hand, she was ecstatic that her lover had figured out a way to use the inherent magical connection to Jusenkyo that he had somehow developed. It could only mean good things for his combat potential and training in the future. On the other hand, it meant that Saeko was falling further behind, something that she was very much not happy about. Still, Saeko girded her soul in serenity, as they had discovered at least a hint of something magical going on in the area, which may lead them to find the Shinrai no Ha, which would allow her to close the gap a bit more. *Anything else will take simply training harder and I am all for that.*

While Rika and Shizuka didn't know what to make of it, and Asia simply put it down to her big brother being who he was, Rias wondered exactly how much that kind of magic would impact someone who had magical resistance, like a devil or fallen. It was true that Jusenkyo, the site where God had died and the final full-scale battle in the conflict between the three factions had occurred, was the greatest source of chaotic magic in the world. However, how did spurts of chaos magic stack up against someone like her or someone stronger like her brother? She couldn't tell, but she was very interested to find out.

Unfortunately for the group, with Rias being the only one able to modify memories, it took them the better part of the rest of the day to clean up after Ranma and Copycat Ken's moving battle. The others were able to help by finding security cameras and phones and erasing what was stored on them. As for videos already uploaded to the Internet, those would be handled by the Astaroth Clan, who undoubtedly had someone in their territory devoted to watching out for any hints of the occult that was a little too beyond the norm. Rika and Shizuka also went off to prepare for a spelunking adventure, getting the equipment Saeko would need to explore the tunnel she had found from the police, thanks to Rika's SAT credentials, having it sent back to the hotel.

By the time Ranma and the others were done with that part of the task, several of Diodora's cousins and even two uncles had shown up, spreading along the beach and then out into the city just in case, letting Rias and her band retreat back to their hotel for the night, meeting Shizuka and Rika there. Once Ranma had transformed into his male body and joined everyone else in his, Rias and Saeko's room, having already covered the topic of what everyone else had been up to, Rias explained what she had discovered.

Saeko nodded thoughtfully, her eyes glinting eagerly. "Well, I think that at least the first challenge is to simply believe in the Shinto faith in order to see this roving torii gate. And I am a follower of that faith, as my family has been for generations."

Asia hummed at that in interest as if she wanted to ask the older girl what all that implied. Despite having spent the better part of a year in Japan, she hadn't really made a study of the local religions at that time. Before she could speak up, Shizuka did so. "Oh, actually, I wanted to see this while we were down at the beach. I thought I saw a second torii gate up there, too. I went looking for it when you all were talking about it and erasing people's phones before Rika dragged me off with her. I'm kind of horrible with technology, so I figured I wouldn't be much help with that."

Rika iterated sagely, when Rias and the others looked at her, most of them having not realized Shizuka hadn't been helping them. "Trust me, she can barely type at all. She uses a phone by holding it up in front of her with both hands, then very slowly and carefully using a single finger to punch out the phone number she wants."

Her girlfriend pouted outrageously at her, but Rika ignored it with aplomb as Rias explained her concerns about the Astaroth clan finding out what they were really after here. "With that in mind I think that Saeko at least should continue to explore this tunnel."

"But what will the rest of us doing?" Mousse inquired.

"Saeko will need someone to watch her back, and someone should go with her," Ranma began, looking around the group before shaking his head. "Although given how Mousse was basically able to sit on nothing above that holy foundation behind the torii gate, I don't think I'll be able to get in unless I can overpower whatever—"

"I can go with her!" Shizuka said, holding up a hand, once more surprising most of the others. They hadn't expected the admittedly quite ditzy blonde to volunteer for anything that could possibly be dangerous. "I brought an emergency medical kit in the SUV, and Rika and I have been scuba diving before, even in caves. And if I'm the only other one here who believes in Shintoism, I'm the only one that can go with her. You don't go cave diving on your own. Ever."

For a moment, Rias wondered if they should call off this entire thing, retreat back to Kuoh and bring Akeno or Tsubaki back here. Upon mature reflection, though, she doubted that Akeno would be much help, considering that she very much did not believe in the religious

aspect of the Shinto faith, and Rias didn't see that changing anytime soon. As for Tsubaki, Rias had no idea what she believed in despite the Shinra clan running the local temples. *And while Koneko would be perfect to fight something in an enclosed space, that doesn't matter if she can't get past the first challenge.*

"I think I'm going to fly out later and see if I can try to push my way through whatever is protecting that entrance," Rias said aloud. "If that's possible, then we don't have to put you at risk, Shizuka. But if we can't... Saeko?"

At the questioning look on her girlfriend's face, Saeko shrugged. *My word, not even a few days into this arrangement and I'm already comfortable with thinking of her as my girlfriend on top of Ranma as my boyfriend? Or is that still lingering hormones from the fight earlier?* "Having someone along who has been cave-diving before would be an immense help, along with generally having another pair of eyes. Although if there is any kind of combat, Shizuka, I do not think I need to say that you will follow my orders, do I?"

"If those orders are run and hide, count me in," Shizuka giggled, which set her chest bouncing in a way that made even Rias twitch a little, and Ranma and Mousse looked away hurriedly. "I know what I am, and I'm not a fighter."

"In that case, I think having someone waiting outside on the lookout for further trouble might be a good idea. Ranma, you should go with them for that." Ranma's brows furrowed, but before he could say anything, Rias continued on, smiling over at Asia. "I wanted to introduce Asia to Linfai, and I don't think that Diodora or anyone with him could get past those wards even if they wanted to with ill intent." *And if they do trouble us, it can serve as proof he was behind what happened today.*

Ranma scowled a bit, not happy at the idea of leaving Asia to be defended by anyone else, even Rias, while in what was almost certainly enemy territory. Yet he remembered how Rias had described those wards, and Ranma had to admit that they did sound kind of formidable. If raw power can't overcome them anyway. *And even then, I didn't see any hints that Diodora was a big powerhouse. Rias even said he wasn't well known for any kind of combat ability.*

"All right, that makes some sense. But would a dimensional bubble, if you put it up over that stone, would it affect whatever is going on there? Or will we have to do this the old-fashioned way and send Saeko and Shizuka unseen down that hole tonight?"

"I'll see. For now, let's all get some food," Rias said, her words summoning a long growl from Ranma's stomach, causing everyone to laugh.

After they all settled down to a takeout meal, Saeko promptly plopped herself down next to Ranma, leaning against his side, one hand lightly on his thigh under the table. He twitched a bit, glancing at her sideways, but the purple-haired onna-bugeisha simply concentrated on her

food, leaving her hand where it was for now. This state of affairs lasted a few moments as Ranma, deciding Saeko just wanted to be a little cuddly, turned back to his meal, blushing brightly as Rias settled down on his other side. While she didn't press as close to him as Saeko had, she really didn't need to.

Rias didn't seem to be in the mood to start anything physical, though, and other than an amused glance over at Saeko, she concentrated more on the food and questioning the others about the fight in more detail, trying to figure out anything that could point at who the attackers had been. It was all well and good to assume the Astaroth heir had something to do with it, but proof was better.

She made no sign that she noticed when Saeko's hand began to trail up and down Ranma's thigh, although Rias did smile a little as he twitched at that touch and then twitched even more when Saeko's hand shifted entirely onto his crotch, gently moving up and down there, causing a certain chain reaction. However, that was all that Saeko did until the meal finished. Once everyone else had left, Shizuka and Rika moved to their room, and Mousse and Asia to theirs, while Rias flew out the window on her mission, only then did Saeko stand up once more. "Well... I think I worked up quite a sweat today and deserve a shower. I don't suppose you would like to... wash my back for me, Ranma?"

Even Ranma wasn't slow enough to miss that hint, and he nodded rapidly, following after his girlfriend into the bathroom.

Lemon start

By the time Ranma had divested himself of his clothing, Saeko had done the same and turned on the hot water in the shower.

Entering the bathroom, Ranma paused, simply staring at Saeko, taking in her body from head to toe. Long, perfect legs, heavily, but not overtly muscled, a small, pert rear, and thin waist. Long purple hair, now slowly sticking to her frame from the water soaking through it. Currently, she was turned away with her eyes closed, which meant that Ranma couldn't see those blue eyes that he so loved, but he could see the hint of her chest even as she raised her hand up into the water coming out of the shower head.

"Gorgeous..." Ranma murmured, simply staring.

Saeko heard that and looked over her shoulder at him, one blue eye-opening to stare at him as she turned just enough to allow more of her chest to be seen. Perky, large and full, capped with dark pink nipples that barely could be seen from this angle, that small glimpse drew Ranma's eyes like a lodestone.

She bit her lip, looking Ranma's body up and down in turn. She had seen him topless before and knew how phenomenally toned he was. She had even seen his legs on display

occasionally as well, but not Ranma's boy bits. He wasn't monstrously huge, but he was certainly on the largish side and thick as well. While that could be simply a sign of his healthy lifestyle and ki, virility was tied to health, Saeko was surprised to see that Ranma shaved down there.

Or perhaps I shouldn't have been. Saeko waxed down there simply because it was less troublesome to deal with, and considering his other form and the fact that such things probably carried over, Saeko probably should've figured that he would think the same thing.

His erection was now at full mast, staring at her almost as if it was a cannon ready to go off, but hopefully, she reflected, not too soon. "Are you just going to stand there and admire me at a distance? Or are you going to get in here and wash my back like I asked you to?"

Snorting, Ranma shook his head and stepped into the warm shower, pulling her into a hug and a kiss that quickly deepened, his tongue invading her mouth as Ranma pushed Saeko gently against the side of the shower, the cool tiles causing a shiver down her body. Slowly pulling away from the kiss, Ranma licked at her tongue for a moment as it tried to follow his own before moving down her body, nipping and sucking at her neck. "Are you sure? Are you sure you want to do this?"

"If...mmm... By this... Yyyy...you mean going... All the way, it iss, it's hard to speak when you areEEE!" Saeko moaned, then hissed in pain as Ranma bit down on her collarbone, leaving a mark there for certain. Grabbing at his pigtail, she pulled him away, shaking her head firmly. "We are not going to go all the way, Ranma. Not in a random hotel's shower. But I realized early on in the battle with those rogue devils that I would not have survived it without your training."

Ranma made to speak, but Saeko leaned up and kissed him quickly, then pushed him back, twisting the two of them around until he was pointed back onto a ledge-like seat that was built into one of the other sides of the shower. Another push had Ranma sitting down on it, and Saeko smirked at him before kissing him again, then slowly moving down his body, her hands working up and down his chest, then down to his hips, and finally, one of them began to gently stroke up and down his dick. Saeko's other hand moved from his other thigh to cup his balls as she continued to make her way down his body, kissing and biting, trying to leave marks but not being able to get through her lover's durability, unfortunately. Ranma made to stop her, but she quickly shook her head, one hand rising from his cock to smack at his chest. "So I decided that you deserved a treat."

"You, you really don't have to--" Ranma stammered, understanding now what Saeko wanted to do.

"But I want to! As I said, this is a reward, and this is all going to be about you tonight, Ranma."

Frankly, if I let him go down on me, I don't know if I'll be able to stop us from going all the way. And not only is this not exactly the most romantic setting to lose your virginity, but given all the talk with Rias earlier about the definition of purity, I'm not willing to take any chances, Saeko reminded herself very firmly. With that thought, Saeko finished her journey, plopping down on her knees between Ranma's legs, staring up at him as she nuzzled against his cock, examining it closely for a moment.

It wasn't very veiny, surprisingly. It was smooth and had only a few veins, none of which rose very far out of the rest of the shaft, which felt about as hard as a sword's hilt to Saeko. The head was wider than the rest a slight bit, purple and leaking copious fluid, which added to the overall smoothness caused by the water pouring down the pair of them.

"Sae-chan..." Ranma began again, only to cut off into a moan as Saeko licked at the head of his dick before moving down his shaft slowly, licking, kissing and then moving back up and down for several moments.

Looking up, Saeko saw Ranma watching her, his blue eyes wide and staring, and she smiled in victory before once more making her way up to his tip. There, Saeko hesitated for a moment before opening her mouth. She licked around the head a few more times, getting used to the taste of his precum, which tasted strangely like some kind of apple juice, almost. Saeko then slowly leaned forward, taking the head into her mouth.

If Ranma had thought the sensations that Saeko was causing with just her tongue and kisses had been astonishing, this was a whole other level. Saeko's mouth was warm, wet, the feel of her tongue moving around his cockhead giving more sensation. Strangely enough, the feel of her teeth just gently grazing both above and below was also adding to the sensation.

For her part, Saeko couldn't say that she actually enjoyed what she was doing at first, but Ranma's little moans and grunts egged her on, and eventually, the taste of his precum and the heady musk coming off him, despite the warm water falling over both of their bodies from the shower, awoke something inside her. A tingle began in her crotch, her own juices mingling with the water below, her nipples hardening further from their already aroused state to being almost painful.

She continued to work at his shaft with one hand, the other cupping his balls gently, as slowly but surely, she began to work her mouth up and down on his cock, taking just a little bit more each time she moved. Then, feeling a little more daring, Saeko pulled her tongue back a bit, deliberately running her teeth along the bottom and upper portion of his shaft.

Ranma grunted a bit, reaching down to wind his fingers through her hair, causing Saeko to look up at him. "A bit too much teeth there, Sae-chan."

Hearing that term of endearment from Ranma and the feel of his fingers in her hair caused Saeko practically to swoon, her arousal rising further. The hand working his shaft fell

away, reaching between her legs, and two of Saeko's fingers began to move up and down her moist cleft, causing her to whimper as she began to match that movement with the movement of her head up and down Ranma's shaft.

Her fingers pushing her own arousal, Saeko redoubled her efforts, bobbing her head forward almost convulsively for a moment. She gagged as she took just a bit too much of his shaft in her mouth, and Ranma made to pull her away, but Saeko's hand squeezed his balls, forcing him to grunt and stop, as Saeko held herself in place. Slowly, she got used to it, to the sensation of his cock pushing past her mouth and into her throat. It wasn't exactly pleasant, but the pain of it actually stoked her arousal a bit, and one finger slowly slid between her folds, moving in and out.

Slowly, Saeko pulled back, then moved forward again to that same position, forward and back. Forward and back, her tongue also slathering around his cock as much as it could while her second finger joined the first, matching her timing.

Ranma's endurance for all things physical was nearly superhuman. Pain, simple endurance, durability, agility, all of those he had well beyond the level of even the most dedicated athlete. However, when it came to sexual things, that didn't exactly carry over in a one-to-one ratio. After a few seconds, he gasped, grunted, and lifted his hips up off of the stool, thrusting up into Saeko's mouth more. "CUMMING!"

Saeko gagged, not having been prepared for it, then gagged again as Ranma grunted and released down her throat, forcing her to gulp it down lest she be drowned. Worse, as if by some innate instinct, Ranma gripped Saeko's head, keeping it in place. Ranma's cock fired off several bursts one after another, and Saeko spluttered, the thick ooze of his cum pouring down her throat, filling her mouth and then dripping down her chin as her hand below worked her pussy as hard as she could. She couldn't take it and pushed back against his hands, the pain of that adding still more sensation but saving her from gagging further.

As Ranma began to finish coming in her mouth, Saeko brought herself over the edge, moaning around his cock. Saeko rested there for a moment, the head of Ranma's cock resting on her tongue in her mouth before slowly pulling back, staring up at him, then down at his cock again, which was still hard despite having come so much. "Well," Saeko whispered, licking her lips and mentally noting that Ranma's come was actually somewhat tasty despite some of the stories she'd heard from other girls. *Like a meaty cherry sauce or something.* "It's nice to know that while you might finish fast, your recovery time seems absurd the quick as well. That just means I'm going to be able to..." Saeko licked her lips again, removing the last dollop of cum, "Perfect my technique before we're through here..."

End Lemon

OOOOOOO

In the hotel room next door, Asia and Mousse settled down to watch some TV. Asia quickly found what looked like a very funny martial arts movie and smiled happily. "Do you think that Ranma and the others would like to watch this with us? Should I go get them?"

When Asia made to stand up Mousse gently took her wrist, holding her in place and shaking his head quickly. "I, I don't think so. I think that Saeko and Ranma want to have some alone time right now." *We could maybe invite Rika and Shizuka over, although they also might be a little preoccupied.*

They were. With Shizuka going into danger, Rika wanted to make very, very clear to her girlfriend what she would be missing out on if she died. Not two minutes after they had entered their hotel, she had taken the lead for once and had Shizuka backed up against the wall of the doorway, her blouse ripped open and feeling her up, with one hand trailing down into her panties.

At first, Asia just blinked, not understanding for a second before finally understanding and sitting down with a blush. "That, that must be nice, I suppose," she said, more to say something than really understanding what she was saying.

"I wouldn't know," Mousse said, allowing a rare moment of rolling jealousy and pain coming out of his voice.

Asia cocked her head thoughtfully, looking over at her friend, before reaching out and patting the hand that he had grabbed her wrist with before, having let it go as she sat back down. "Would, would you like to talk about it?"

Mousse blinked at that, staring at the shorter, younger girl for a moment. "I do not think that talking about it will help much, Asia." Now that they were alone, he was much less formal with her, which Asia was glad for, not having gotten used to the fact that he would be formal with her in public in the first place.

"Well, tell me what you see in Shampoo," she said instead of letting it go. Something inside her was urging her on, and that something wasn't just her general dislike of the Amazon girl. "When did you fall in love with her? When did you start to pursue her?"

"Um, looking back on it, I think I've always been interested in Shampoo. We were friends growing up, and then, as we grew, as we trained together and..." From there, Mousse began to talk, the words pouring out of him. How he was the only young male in the Amazon village to take up the art of combat, and even then, only because his mother, the master of the Hidden Weapons Technique, had not had a daughter to pass on her skill to. Or even any young female relative.

From there, he and Shampoo, the young heiress of the clan, had been thrown into numerous training exercises together and grown closer than Shampoo had to the other girls,

many of whom looked down on Mousse because he was a boy. Shampoo never did, and in fact, encouraged him in many ways. It was no wonder that Mousse became enamored of her.

At the same time, though, his eyesight had begun to fail, which had led to numerous, admittedly hilarious, moments. Even Asia, as kind and gentle a soul as you would likely find on earth, had trouble not laughing aloud at hearing how Mousse had passionately declared his love for Shampoo, only to realize that he was speaking to a practice dummy once he put his glasses on. On the other hand, the time he had brought her roses, only to get her room wrong, and hand them over to her mother, who gave the game away quickly upon laughing at him.

Yet despite Mousse telling her about those times through his own rose-tinted glasses, Asia could tell how Shampoo's actions toward Mousse became more and more negative over time. Even before Shampoo had left on her hunt for Ranma, there seemed to be little affection towards Mousse. Whether or not it had been there in the first place, she really didn't know, as most of what he described about Shampoo being nice to him was just that: Her being nice. In her opinion, Shampoo wasn't even really being friendly beyond a certain point.

Soon, Mousse's admiration for her had also begun to make her a bit uncomfortable. He was now describing not Shampoo's actions or her character but her looks, her body, and her voice. The last of which was the only one of the three that made Asia not embarrassed. At that point, she gently raised a hand, and Mousse halted, looking at her quizzically.

"That, all of that sounds a lot like some of the mangas that I have read since coming to Japan. However, some of it doesn't. Despite how many of those mangas that I have actually read, I am in no way an expert on romance. But I can already see that getting all of that off of your chest helped. It always helps to have someone willing to lend an ear. And I have to say I am not very happy about listening to how Shampoo began to treat you in Nerima."

It was actually from before that, but Asia felt that Mousse wasn't really ready to acknowledge the fact that Shampoo had not looked at him with any favor even before Ranma had been on the scene. "I don't think that Ranma in any way tried to encourage Shampoo, although obviously, he hasn't told me much about the girls that were chasing after him. But it seems to me as if, well, love has to be a two-way street, right?" She almost asked instead of stated. "The person you're interested in needs to show some interest in you and can't treat you as badly as it seems that Shampoo has occasionally done. Locking you in a cage while you're in duck form and teasing you, that's just wrong!"

That was actually the least objectionable among the many things Asia had just heard Shampoo had done to Mousse upon returning to Nerima after going to Jusenkyo. There were several worse instances, but Mousse hadn't mentioned them. Asia had heard about them from Ranma occasionally, and they had bothered her even before she started to get to know the hidden weapons master.

"In her defense, you're not supposed to keep live poultry around in a kitchen anyway, so keeping me in a cage was actually lawful," Mousse said with a shrug.

"But you can understand what I'm saying, can't you?" Asia said, and greatly daring, squeezed his hand once more, hoping to help Mousse in a way that her sacred gear could not. "If she just treats you like a duck instead of a boy, that's wrong. If she just treats you like a nuisance despite all the times you've tried to help her, that's wrong, too! You **can't** be the only person trying to pursue someone. It needs to be a back-and-forth thing, just like it is with Ranma, Saeko and Rias. They're all interested in one another. They've all chased after one another and don't treat each other bad!"

Seeing Asia so angry at how Shampoo had treated him occasionally over the years made Mousse smile, and he reached over, ruffling her hair with his free hand. "You're kind, Asia. And you're right. Speaking about it allowed me to get a lot off my chest and examine some of the things that happened in Nerima more closely. I think I can finally acknowledge the fact that Ranma was never after Shampoo and that Shampoo doesn't have any chance with him in turn. Hopefully, once she realizes that she and I can start over."

Realizing that this was as far as she was going to get with Mousse at the moment, Asian nodded, smiling warmly. "Well, I think that is actually quite a bit of progress then! I'm glad. You and Ranma seem to be good friends when you're not mentioning Shampoo or vice versa."

Mousse grumbled a bit at that just for the look of things and deliberately turned the conversation back over to what was on the TV, starting the movie up once more, not noticing that he was still holding her hand until the movie began, at which point he pulled away with a faint blush on his face. One that, had he but looked at her rather than the TV, he might've noticed that the younger girl was also sporting.

OOOOOOO

Shampoo leaped down from the roof of the train station onto the train, clinging there with her claws. Currently in cat form, she had used her form to escape from her grandmother once more. Thanks to Mousse, she knew that Ranma, Asia and several others were heading to Hakata.

She had no issue with the healer being around Ranma. It was very clear that Ranma held familial feelings towards her rather than anything romantic. But the news that Mousse had told Cologne, that the sword-wielding girl, who Shampoo thought of as a cheap Japanese knockoff of herself, and the redhead devil who had beaten her in a martial arts match were with them? That could not be allowed! *Hang on, husband, Shampoo coming!*

OOOOOOO

Rias smirked as she saw the semi-comatose form of Ranma lying out on the bed next to a quietly humming Saeko, whose smirk reminded Rias very strongly of a cat who got the canary. *Or should that be cream?* "Someone had fun," she announced with a chuckle.

Saeko smiled up at her, but making no move to shift away from Ranma, whose arm likewise seemed fused into place around her waist. "I did indeed. Ten out of ten would recommend."

Ranma snorted at that, coming back to the here and now as he sat up. Turning to look at Rias, Ranma asked, "So, how did your mission go?"

"Well, I can tell you two things. One, we are being observed here in this hotel. There is a bird-type familiar that my bats spotted around the place and a few humans watching the entrances. Getting out was harder than I expected, but my bat familiars can transform into me, so after I spotted the bird, I fell back to the hotel's roof, then covered myself in an illusion and sent one of them out like me. After that, just in case, I flew in the direction of Kuoh as if heading home for the night, then circled back towards the city over the ocean towards the beach."

That she was also using illusion charms of the time didn't need to be said. Both her listeners had been used to the fact that no one saw a devil fallen or angel (Gabriel anyway) flying or otherwise around if they didn't want to be seen. However, familiars and such could have magic spells on them to see through invisibility or illusion magic. Some could even do so as an inherent ability of their species.

"I found the stone with the torii gate with some difficulty, and as we figured, I couldn't even see the second one. I made a point of standing on every stone I could, and couldn't feel a single difference, nor could I detect any magic, which is highly unusual, as I could sense the Ma ward around the temples. That probably means, unfortunately, that a dimensional pocket would not be able to pull that tunnel or whatever is hidden behind that ward into itself." Rias smiled apologetically at Saeko. "Which means you and Shizuka need to start out tonight, around four thirty or so in the morning, I think. Sorry."

"Well, it's a very good thing that Rika and Shizuka already went out and grabbed our scuba diving supplies," Ranma said philosophically. "So the plan you made up sounds good. I can go with them, wait until they enter the tunnel, come back here and then escort you and Asia to the temple before returning to them." During the day, Ranma would be able to utilize his Umi-Sen-Ken to stay hidden while on guard outside the chute, tunnel or whatever it might be. "Although I would really rather stay with you and Asia since we figure Dio-aho is interested in her."

"I'm not altogether defenseless, Ranma," Rias admonished, wagging a finger in front of him for a moment. "And remember those wards around the temple. We also all have our cell phones, so if anything happens, we can call you."

Ranma still thought it was silly to send him off to watch over Saeko and Shizuka, especially after they were beyond whatever ward was defending the tunnel from unbelievers. But from the look on Rias' face, there was some other reason why Rias didn't want Ranma with her. "Are you... are you worried I'll say or do something if we..."

Rias stared at him, then sighed, shaking her head and staring at him sadly, like a mother who could not believe their child had just done something so silly. "Ranma... you really don't remember, do you?"

Brows furrowing, Ranma stared at Rias in confusion. "Remember, remember what?"

"Tsubaki Shinra. Sona's queen.... She called home to see if her family knew about you and found out, she had been affianced to you? Does that ring a bell?"

"Um, given my old man's antics, that doesn't really narrow it down," Ranma said, tugging at his pigtail sheepishly before blinking. "Oh yeah, Kiba got all formal about that, right? Kind of forgot."

"*SIGGGGGHHHHH...*" Rias and Saeko sighed in unison, and Rias continued. "Well, she said something about how her family took you and your father in. And since Linfai is a Shinra, and you mentioned how you and your father stayed at temples almost as much as at dojos, Linfai might be the one who made that deal or just know about you and your father. I'd really like to not make another local enemy, Ranma. So keep your phone on, and given how fast you can move, I think that will be enough if I need help at all. Which is debatable."

She moved over, giving him a quick kiss, then began poking him as hard as she could in the sternum. "I have had enough of being a damsel in distress, Ranma. I will handle Diodora on my own if he makes trouble. You're the bigger gun option, alright?"

Ranma nodded and then pulled Rias into a kiss, with a giggling Saeko beside him.

True to what Rias had said, around five hours later, the alarm she'd set went off, waking the trio from their respective beds relatively easily. They had prepared before heading to bed, and both Ranma and Saeko were ready with ki-expanded bags holding the scuba gear, medical kit and some other things that Saeko thought they might need.

Waking up Shizuka, despite the fact that Rias and the others had warned her and Rika to be ready, took much longer than they expected.

The sight of the blonde woman guzzling down hastily prepared coffee from the small kitchenette her room contained was something that had Ranma shaking his head from side to side. "I've never understood the need for coffee or anyone drinking it like that! I can see steam still coming off it, and she's guzzling that black gunk like it's water."

“That’s Shizuka for you. Trust me, I have no idea how she can drink coffee and still have good teeth, let alone eat all the food she does. It all seems to go to her boobs,” Rika said, rolling her eyes. “Are you sure you don’t want me to come with you?”

“I’m going to be carrying Shizuka over the rooftops with Saeko. No offense, but you'd just slow Saeko down if she had to carry you the same way,” Ranma said, shaking his head. *I’d be able to easily carry both of them and roofhop at the same time. But carrying one extremely curvaceous gal is already gonna be embarrassing enough. Carrying two of them would be much worse.*

After finishing her last cup of coffee, Shizuka dutifully cleaned the cup, grabbed a bite from a bagel that she and Rika had gotten from somewhere, then gave Rika an extremely deep kiss, so much so that Ranma was blushing and looking away and Saeko and Rias looked as if they were going to start taking notes before she slowly pulled back, winked at her girlfriend, and turned to Ranma. Striding over, she hopped up, forcing him to catch her with his arms under her body. “Now, up, up and away, Superboy!”

“Ugh, American comics. I’m Iron Fist if I’m anyone,” Ranma grumbled, even as he turned towards the door, which Rias helpfully opened for the two of them, with Saeko following after. Rias returned to her room, having already wished her two lovers good luck and telling Ranma that the rest of the group would be ready by breakfast to head over to the temple. “We are going to impose on them after all, and bearing gifts is always a good way to get over such a thing.”

She then made certain all three had the right location for the temple marked out on their Moogles and that the two intrepid explorers had their phones in watertight cases, which joined the rest of the scuba gear in Ranma’s weapons space. The bag, much like the rest of the scuba gear, had been purchased the evening before by Rika and Shizuka. With that done, she waved them farewell and headed back to the room she had been sharing with Ranma and Saeko, eager to get back to sleep.

Ranma and Saeko headed towards a nearby window set into the far end of the hallway, which would allow them to start their journey at around the twelfth floor. Saeko leaped out first, landing easily on a rooftop four stories below.

“You ready, Shizuka?” Ranma asked, winking down at the girl who had not stepped down out of his arms, letting Rika handle the phone issue. This hadn’t been because she was lazy, although she was, but it seemed to be a natural thing between the two women.

She grinned, and Ranma instantly leaped out from that window.

“Woohoo!” Shizuka whooped in his ear, hugging Ranma tightly around the shoulders, pressing her gigantic chest into his own almost to the point that it had flattened out. “Oh wow, what a rush! It’s like being on a motorcycle in the sky!”

For his part, Ranma blushed rosily but resolutely kept his eyes locked on his girlfriend's rear ahead of him. *Don't look down, don't look down, mistakes have been made!*

Saeko noticed his semi-distress and slowed down, smiling over at Ranma and then darting away, swaying her hips a bit more than normal. Not that I can blame him with an arm full of Shizuka to handle, but I can at least make him concentrate on me more. "Catch me if you can, Ranma."

With that challenge thrown down, Ranma raced after her, almost ignoring the bouncy mass in his arms.

Shizuka's delight in the rooftop hopping experience did not fade, and she kept on hugging Ranma tightly even as she looked around wildly. Her eyes were filled with bemused wonder at the site of the nighttime city from an angle that she had never expected existed, let alone dreamed of actually enjoying herself. Not once did she note or acknowledge it anyway, too busy just looking around them.

Soon, the three of them arrived within sight of the beach. There, a bit of larceny allowed the trio to enter some of the changing rooms, where the two women quickly changed into their swimsuits. This was different in Saeko's case than the one she had worn the day before, a simple one-piece sports swimsuit.

Meanwhile, Ranma transformed into his female body. They would have to swim out to the rock after all, and frankly, even if they hadn't had to, with the water so close, Ranma felt it prudent to get ahead of fate.

Thankfully for Ranma's sensibilities, when she rejoined them, Shizuka was wearing a swimsuit much like Ranma and Saeko's, although it looked a little too small on her frame in both the hip and chest area. This left her bulging out in various places that Ranma very carefully did not look at.

Regardless, they were soon in the water, with Ranma having transferred her ki space into a bag on her back while she and Saeko had waited for Shizuka to join them. Saeko had done the same to a small pouch tied around her waist. "What took you so long, anyway?" the redhead asked as she led the way out into the water, with Saeko taking up the third position, glancing all around them and then out to sea to make sure that there was no one watching.

There was a patrol at the far end of the beach she could see. There was also some kind of disturbance going on near what she took to be a club, but no one was looking in their direction right now.

"Don't you know you're not supposed to ask a lady that question?" Shizuka huffed, swimming beside the redhead with decent form.

When Saeko joined them, she had the answer and tickled one of Shizuka's feet as she moved up beside the blonde woman on her other side. "You couldn't get that swimsuit to fit, could you?"

Shizuka's lack of an answer to that was enough of a reply, and Ranma resolutely kept her mouth shut even as Saeko began to giggle. While Shizuka wasn't the most powerful swimmer, she was actually quite decent for a normal person, and she didn't slow the two martial artists up nearly as much as they had feared. Soon, they reached the large rock jutting out of the ocean with the torii gate that Ranma could see on it, and Ranma helped Shizuka up the water-soaked rock as Saeko went ahead of them, standing beside the second torii gate that only she and Shizuka could see.

Ranma hadn't examined the site before and watched with interest as Saeko pointed to where the torii gate should be and then where the chute or tunnel leading down into the rock behind it was. A second later, Saeko let loose a gasp as Ranma's hand passed straight through the torii gate as if he were a ghost. "Ranma, your hand it just..."

"Gah!" Ranma hastily removed his hand, staring at it and then at where the torii gate should be, shaking his head. "I felt something, but it was like, like moving through thin water, if that means anything. Bah, magic. Even though I can use it to a certain extent at this point, I don't think I'm ever gonna get used to it."

Ranma then attempted to push his hand down into the tunnel that the other two were describing to them behind the torii gate. This time, his hand bounced off the solid surface there, just like what Mousse had reported happened to him when he literally sat down in the center of the tunnel entrance despite Saeko having described the hole to him.

"It feels like I'm touching moss, an inch-thick layer of moss," Ranma mused, shaking his head and pulling his hand back. He then quickly pulled out the scuba gear for the two women, helping them get it on, looking between them and where the hole should be. "And you're positive you'll have enough space?"

"It's not all that wide, but I think we should," Saeko agreed, staring down into the hole for a moment. They were only getting by the moon above at present rather than the two helmet flashlights that Rika had brought them. Shining a light out here would very obviously be seen by someone on shore, and none of them wanted to draw more attention to themselves, either from normal people or the Astaroth Clan, not after what Rias had said about the weapon belonging 'rightfully' the local clans.

Luckily, when they experimented, Saeko was able to drop a rope down into the tunnel, the edge of which Ranma quickly tied off out of sight, although to his eyes, it just seemed to disappear into the rock. They spent a few moments making certain that the edge of the tunnel wasn't sharp enough to start cutting into the rope, and then Saeko began climbing down rapidly.

She was almost out of sight into the darkness of the tunnel when she clicked on her helmet light, reporting, "I can see some water below me, nothing else just yet."

Shizuka bounced in place next to Ranma, staring down into the hole and then around her, the coffee that she had earlier making her even bouncier than normal in many ways. Despite her self-control earlier, Ranma had trouble pulling his eyes away from this sight for a moment before shaking her head, turning her attention back down into the hole. "How's the climb?"

"Decent enough. There are a lot of handholds here. I think even without a rope, with enough light, I'd be able to get along easily enough. I don't see any kind of traps just yet, but if that Indiana Jones movie we watched after we finished in the shower was any indication, I am certain to find some eventually."

The dry tone that Saeko spoke with caused Ranma to nod his head at her words before the complete context of them registered, by which point Shizuka was already giggling. *Then again, Ranma, it isn't as if your friends aren't aware of your relationship with Saeko and Rias. You don't have to hide it, and there aren't any crazy rivals around the next corner waiting to attack, and the girls aren't gonna go for knives at the merest hint that you're actually giving one of them more affection than any of the others.*

He had actually been a bit worried about that when Rias returned, but thankfully, Rias just seemed amused by everything. Although what she and Saeko had been giggling about as they looked down at Rias' chest before they all got into bed was something Ranma wasn't going to speculate on right now. *Very much not the time for that.*

"Can you tell how far down you are?" Ranma asked, feeling kinda silly to basically be talking to what he saw as just a piece of rock. A rock that had some rope sticking out of it without any sign of an actual hole for the rope to go through. *It ain't the weirdest thing I've done, but it's up there.* "I can't even see anything. Not even a hint of the light is coming through whatever illusion is hiding this from anyone who doesn't believe in Shintoism. And isn't that a mouthful?"

Saeko's chuckle came up to him through the stone, the sound at least thankfully not being blocked out by the illusion, warming Ranma's heart a bit. "It is indeed a rather large mouthful. As for how far down I've gotten, I'm certainly further down than we traveled up the outside of the rock mound. I'm basically well below the water line right now."

There was a faint sound of a splash as Saeko dropped the last few feet into the water at the bottom of the tunnel, shining her light all around, as she pulled her scuba mask around and down. It was the first time she had used such a thing, but Shizuka had walked her through how to use them while they were all up on the rock. Doing so, she saw an opening to one side underneath the water carefully hidden so it could not be seen until the explorer was in the water.

She reported this to Ranma, then continued as she, with some difficulty, pulled on her scuba flippers. "Send Shizuka down. I'll want her to make certain I have this scuba mask on appropriately before I go very deep into the water. But this still looks very promising."

The jittery Shizuka didn't need anyone to tell her twice, and soon, she was crouching down next to the rock, then swinging her legs down and over to a handhold that she could see below. Her hands on the rope, she began to make her way down, slower than Saeko had, but Ranma wasn't going to comment. The fact that the nurse was up for this kind of adventure at all was surprising on its own. *And that she's able to cling to the rope at all with those big tits of hers trying to push her away.*

Unlike Saeko, Shizuka did not wait until she was out of range of the moonlight to switch to her helmet light. With it, she could see that the handholds were actually designed that way. The tunnel itself, while looking rough at the top, was actually shiny for most of its length. The stone was natural stone, but the workmanship was clear to see. This continued down to where a series of sharp, lightning-like carvings were etched into the tunnel wall right above the opening to the next segment of the tunnel.

Despite Shizuka's heart, her upper body strength wasn't really all that good, and she still took a while to get down. By the time Shizuka was clinging to the rope and the side of the tunnel directly above Saeko's head, Ranma could see dawn over the horizon and reported this quickly to the two girls before pulling the Umi-Sen-Ken over himself.

During that time, Saeko had moved down into the water, staring around her with her headlamp, then going back up. Similar to the carvings and workmanship that Shizuka had noticed on the climb down, the unwater portion of the tunnel was made out of natural stone. There didn't seem to be any fish or connection to the ocean beyond, but she had spotted what looked like carvings on the wall further down and was interested to see what they were like.

In this way, Saeko had also gotten used to the minuscule weight of the scuba gear on her back, although she did make a note that she would need to be careful of Shizuka, just in case it was too heavy for her. The larger woman had some trouble getting her scuba fins on just like Saeko had, and Saeko very carefully kept her face clear of a smile, watching her antics in the water. At the same time, Shizuka was actually faster about getting her scuba mask on than Saeko had been.

The nurse took a moment to check Saeko's, smiling in approval, then turned around and gestured Saeko to do the same as she treaded water, bits of her causing quite a bit more buoyancy than had done for Saeko. Yet despite that, once more, she looked to be very at home in the water. "I take it that swimming is your favorite type of exercise, Shizuka-sensei?"

"Just Shizuka, please. You're not a student, and I don't work at Fujimi High any longer, anyway. As for swimming, I did say that Rika and I had been scuba diving before. I've always enjoyed swimming, ever since puberty."

That made a lot of sense to Saeko, who just nodded. After making certain that the enclosed nature of the tunnel and the weight of the scuba gear didn't bother Shizuka, she bade farewell to Ranma and then dove into the water, Shizuka following. The tunnel wasn't wide enough for them both to swim side-by-side, and Saeko led the way just in case they ran into any kind of danger, making a note that she would need to stop and glance behind her occasionally to check in with Shizuka. Shizuka surprised her, however, by almost instantly grabbing at her leg.

When Saeko turned around, Shizuka made a point of holding her hands up in a wait motion, her eyes and face looking worried through the mask. She then held up her hands then began moving them in a series of hand movements. *There truly are hidden depths to Shizuka, aren't there?* Saeko thought as she nodded along, understanding that each movement meant a different signal.

All this took about ten minutes, and then they were off, swimming deeper into the underwater tunnel. The tunnel was seemingly level as they went, but Saeko knew they had to be below the ocean floor here. Soon, they reached the carvings that Saeko had glimpsed from the chute.

This proved to be a long mural. The water hadn't done much, surprisingly, to wear away the stone since the water in the tunnel hadn't moved much, if at all, beyond what rain could account for coming in from the entryway. It depicted a scene of a storm engulfing a horde of ships. The storm was all around them, above and below, the ocean waves carved into the floor of the tunnel roiling underneath them, the ships along the lower edge of the wall. It was as if the storm was coming from somewhere further down the tunnel, directed into the fleet of ships that grew in number along the walls as they swam along.

Some of the ships were carved to appear than the others, pushed to the forefront so to speak of the swimmer. So much so that Saeko, who could not have told you a thing about the ships, could tell that the warriors on the ship were Mongolian. They had the helmets, armor and bows that were typically depicted in paintings about the Mongolian invasion. As Saeko looked at the crews more closely, she shivered a bit.

Is it just me, or do the faces of those warriors look like they are locked in terror? And... moving? Nope! Saeko suddenly decided, swimming on hurriedly. *I do not want to confirm that at all, thank you.*

As the ships grew in number, something began to tingle at the back of Saeko's mind. Something was wrong here, or perhaps there was some kind of danger ahead of them. Saeko wasn't certain which, but she slowed her progress and held up a hand. Looking over her shoulder, she saw Shizuka had stopped and was treading water behind her. When she was certain the other woman could see her upraised hand, Saeko used the wait motion that Shizuka had shown her.

When the other woman replied, Saeko moved forward once more, her eyes flicking up, down and around, wary of a trap. She became even more tense when she saw a mound of something in the distance, some kind of metal reflecting the light of Saeko's helmet lamp. *Ah, I think I just found one of the missing explorers.*

Rias had told them all about that little tidbit, hence Saeko's question about Shizuka following her orders the night before. Several people had apparently gone missing in search of the roving torii gate.

Slowing down further, Saeko reached into her pouch, pulling out the same light-magic sword that she had taken from the mass of confiscated weapons back in Kuoh. The blade hummed loudly but did activate, although it heated up the water so much Saeko hissed and instantly turned it off, pushing it back into its sheathe. *Fuck. Hands it is. I should have thought that the water would interfere with the light mag... nope. I could not have seen that coming.*

Chuckling wryly at herself, Saeko continued forward. She was almost to the corpse, and it was indeed a corpse; she could now see the actual skeleton when the first trap sprang. From one of the ships carved into the side of the tunnel, an oar flashed out, pulling out of the wall with whip-like speed, the oars' edge sharp and glistening dark brown in the light of her flashlight.

So fast was it that Saeko knew that had she not gone through the training she had gotten from Ranma, she would never have been able to dodge it. Nevertheless, dodge it she did, twisting inward towards the rest of the oar, her hand lashing out to grab and pull. Knowing that throwing a punch in the water robbed it of much of the force, Saeko went for a grapple.

The oar held itself out away from the wall for a moment, then somehow began to winch back into place. Saeko wondered how that worked, but as she held on, the swordswoman was forced to duck as another oar flashed out. Soon the oar she was holding had moved back toward the wall enough she was able to get her flippers up onto the wall.

Even as the other began to also winch itself backward, Saeko did so, then heaved hard. The stone of the oar, made so as to look as natural as the stone of the tunnel, fought her, but with an explosive push, Saeko broke the edged portion of the oar away, hurling herself towards the other side of the tunnel.

Twisting around, Saeko brought the edge of the oar up towards the second oar, aiming directly below the 'blade' of the oar. Pushing some of her ki into her makeshift weapon, Saeko sliced through the weapon, flipping a bit in the water as she did. The momentum of that strike and her previous effort combined to take her into the wall with what would have been a bruising force for a normal person. For Saeko, she simply grunted into her mask.

Grabbing onto the edge of the now broken oar, Saeko leaned in, staring hard at where it stuck out of the wall. *I... I do not think I can tell, a trap oar from... no, wait! It's too large for the*

ship! Pulling back, she confirmed that observation and smiled thinly, hefting her weapon in one hand as she gestured Shizuka forward, moving forward herself. *Well, now. At least this won't be boring.*

Shizuka paused over the skeleton for a moment, seemingly bowing her head in prayer. She then moved after Saeko, who had quickly continued on, her eyes alight with interest and growing excitement. There wasn't going to be any blood or pain, but the adrenaline of fighting traps with such a handicap as being slowed by the water was still nice.

How long the two of them swam, Saeko didn't know. There was no way to tell time down here. Something neither woman had thought to bring along was a watch, and the mural did not change for a time. Several more traps lashed out towards her from the extra-large oars, but knowing what to look out for let Saeko deal with them relatively easily. It had not apparently helped several of the other explorers. The two swimmers passed over four more skeletons, the bodies entirely gone thanks to decay and the passage of years.

It occurred to Shizuka, following behind the other woman as she demolished trap after trap, to wonder why the water in the tunnel wasn't murkier or filled with bits or whatever. She had never studied how being dunked in water could affect human corpses, but it still felt odd to her that the water here was so normal. *Almost as odd as it was stupid for you and Rika to not remember waterproof watches! Dummy Shizuka, why couldn't you remember that!? You might only have used them once, but it was when you were spelunking, stupid. It's not Rika's job alone to remember everything.*

Shizuka's self-recriminating thoughts were interrupted new trap emerged ahead of her, almost to deadly effect for Saeko. For this time, was in the ceiling of the tunnel, not the sides.

Throughout the time spent dealing with the traps, the sky portion of the mural hadn't changed. And when it did, Saeko missed it. Above in the storm clouds, one of the lightning bolts was gone, replaced by two slits side by side in the roof. From those slits came two yellow-painted swords shaped like thunderbolts.

If not for the instincts honed in her time training with Ranma, Saeko might well have been skewered. As it was, she dodged backward enough so that only the edge of the blade sliced down her front. This practically destroyed her swimsuit, cutting it from her neckline down to her belly button and then another wide cut right over her breast, barely missing her nipple and cutting into her breast just to one side of it. Blood welled up out of the water, but Saeko, without pause, brought her makeshift weapon around, cutting throw both lightning-shaped blades.

Shizuka swam forward, her hands waving everywhere, but Saeko held up a hand, touching the cut down her breast, wincing a bit but nodding to herself. It wasn't deep, painful to be sure, and astonishing that it got through her skin after all the tough training she had gone through with Ranma, but still, she felt it wasn't worth worrying about.

Shizuka's slapping her hands away and pulling out a waterproof bandage told Saeko that the nurse disagreed. What followed was somewhat embarrassing for Saeko as Shizuka fiddled and fondled her breast for a bit, having trouble staying still in the water to work until she was satisfied by how the bandage had adhered to her flesh. She then began to point back the way they had come, but Saeko firmly shook her head, making the 'I'm ok' sign and then, when Shizuka tried to signal going back again, simply swam up and over the woman with a powerful lunge, her makeshift weapon still in her hand.

Soon, the nature of the tunnel shifted. The mural faded, and the sense of danger too, but the tunnel itself continued, its walls now simply showing a calm storm after a bit of blank stone. As this change occurred, Saeko had to wonder how far they had come. *It feels like we've swum quite a ways. If we had done so back toward the town, we would be somewhere past the boardwalk by now.*

Every few minutes, Saeko turned her head to look at Shizuka, who would continually hold up a hand in the 'okay' gesture. Eventually, though, that gesture became less firm, and she started to wave her hand back and forth but didn't touch any of her equipment. That probably meant that the woman was starting to tire out, which was fair enough and Saeko's estimation. *Swimming like this would take it out of most people.*

About ten minutes later, she noticed that her light seemed to be reflecting off something again in the distance. *Another corpse?*

This was proven incorrect quickly. Instead of faded metal or the plastic of a scuba mask, their helmet lights reflected off a band of some kind of copper. For some reason, Saeko's mind flashed to a weird, esoteric history lesson on ships, which had mentioned that copper had occasionally been put on European wooden vessels to keep the wood from decomposing in the water or being attacked by barnacles and other things.

Even better for the two explorers, that copper band was at the end of the tunnel. Saeko swam until she could reach out and touch the band of metal in the wall, although, obviously, she didn't. Instead, she looked around, then upward, and saw what looked like the surface of the water above her.

Instantly, Saeko signaled Shizuka to wait. Shizuka nodded, before startling Saeko by grabbing onto the copper thing. Instinctively, Saeko flinched, but nothing happened, and, peering closer, she noticed the band of copper stuck out enough from the wall to act like a wide handhold or foothold. She waited a moment, then began to swim upward.

Soon, Saeko burst out of the water, shining her light all around. There were a series of steps leading up to another entryway, marked by two gods on either side of it. They could only be gods, as most mortals didn't seem to be throwing lightning around as these two were carved out to be doing. However, there was no threat that she could see. *Nor any sign of a mural to hide any traps.*

Pulling off her mask, Saeko breathed in for a moment, frowning. "Pine fresh?? How exactly does that work?"

Shrugging that thought off, Saeko moved forward until her hands could reach up onto the first step, at which point she pulled herself up out of the water. She waited a moment there, one hand ready to whip out her exorcist sword from the weapon space within, the other hand holding her makeshift weapon.

But again, no physical threat manifested itself, and slowly, she deposited the weapon to one side. Pulling off of her scuba gear, Saeko laid it aside, then dove back down into the water, where she found Shizuka waiting, her eyes closed behind her mask. A tap on her shoulder startled the blonde into panicking for a second, but seeing Saeko hovering above her without her scuba gear, she grinned behind her mask and quickly followed the younger girl up into the air, where she pulled off her scuba mask quickly, breathing in deeply. "I never thought that we would be gone for so long! I thought that we would find some kind of underwater cavern or something directly underneath the rock!" Shizuka complained. "And then there's your desire to keep going after being injured! Seriously, Saeko-chan, that wound needs to be looked at more. But do you know how many body paces we swam?"

Chuckling quietly at the speed with which Shizuka spoke, Saeko moved back over to the step leading up out of the water, pulling herself up and out before reaching down and grabbing at Shizuka's scuba gear, letting the woman shuck herself out of it. "No, were you able to keep that in your mind? And I'm a martial artist, Shizuka. Stubbornness is our bread and butter."

"No, I thought you might be able to. And that's no excuse for being stupid, Saeko-chan," Shizuka answered, watching as Saeko put the two scuba packs to one side of the door, waiting until she came back and helped her out, knowing her upper body strength wasn't all that good. *My legs have certainly gotten their workout today though.*

"Well, regardless, we're here. And our second hurdle, that of physicality, I presume, has also been passed."

Shizuka shrugged ignorance of that, finishing pulling off her flashlight from the side of her mask and waving it around in her hand. Saeko kept hers on her head, her sword in one hand, her other free for now. "Those statues are the two gods, Raijin and Fujin. Look, one of them has the famous bag of winds and those darker stripes on its kilt thing make it look like it's been taken from a tiger."

Saeko nodded. "And the other one has the den den daiko drums. The color's faded for some reason, but there's something important too. Can you smell the air here?"

"Huh... yeah," Shizuka mumbled, sniffing the air. "Um, that's interesting. I suppose it could be tied into the reason why these statues don't have colors to them? And is it just me, or does it look like that's another torii gate marked out on either side of this area?"

Saeko blinked, looking in the corners and agreeing that the surprisingly observant Shizuka was right once again. "You're right. Those are definitely another torii gate. Which might imply that we're about to step from one challenge to another."

"After y... Ahhh!" Shizuka began before cutting herself off. "But first, Saeko-chan, let me look at that wound!"

Saeko grumbled, but when the nurse peremptorily pushed on her shoulders, she sat down at the edge of the water. Shizuka surprised her by pulling her swimsuit down off her shoulders, causing her chest to juggle for a moment and removing the bandage on her breast just as briskly. Saeko was in no way used to being stared at like this by anyone bar Ranma, not having gone this far with Rias just yet, and remained uncomfortable throughout the procedure, during which Shizuka sprayed the wound with some kind of anti-bacterial thing, then wrapped Saeko's chest up with a wide bandage, before using these strange hourglass shaped bits of metal, they looked quite painful, and Saeko had no idea what they were, to stick the edges of her swimsuit back together before pulling it back up Saeko's body. "You're good to go now, Saeko-chan."

Nodding at the other woman, Saeko moved forward under the low-slung entryway between the two statues. However, a few feet into the tunnel, just out of sight of their lights, it narrowed dramatically. So much so, that Saeko was going to have trouble scooting along sideways through it. How Shizuka would get a through, she had no idea. Worse were a series of small marks on the floor, areas of stone that didn't look like the rest of it to Saeko's by-this-point-trained eye. *If those don't spit out something like a dagger or spear, I will eat okra.*

Saeko hated okra. Slimy. Chewy. Disgusting. Yuck.

To either side were two carvings, carvings of monks with extremely thin faces. There was writing, too, but Saeko couldn't read it. She could make out the different words but couldn't figure out what was actually being said, the sentences seemed to be all scrambled. *And I was never good at that kind of word game.* With a sigh, Saeko turned to her companion. "Shizuka, I don't suppose you..."

"It's an old kind of poetic trick, used by monks when passing letters during the Tokugawa era when the nobles had begun to turn against the power of the temples," Shizuka said, coming up behind Saeko so much that her breasts pressed into Saeko's back for a moment as she pointed at the lettering. "They would also make fun of the nobles with that kind of thing, especially any local samurai who had annoyed them. A lot of times, their writings were preserved, dirty jokes, love poems to the wives of powerful nobles, stories about how they were blowhards and so forth. I love stuff like that."

"Considering that it was probably one of my ancestors that was ragged on, I don't suppose it will come as any surprise to you that I don't have any time for stories of that nature that don't deal with samurai," Saeko said dryly. "What is being said here?"

“Only one who has willingly turned aside from the pleasures of the flesh and who has trained their mind will pass. Seek truth among lies and you will find your way forward,” Shizuka said, turning her attention from the writing to the very tight, narrow slit that the tunnel became. “I’m kind of presuming they just mean food rather than anything else? The rest I don’t get.”

“Look down, Shizuka dear,” Saeko murmured, scowling a little as Shizuka did so, yelping as she spotted the holes in the floor. Kneeling along the floor, Saeko frowned, then snickered. “Ah, Indiana Jones, don’t fail me now. Shizuka, you might want to stay here. I can’t tell what...”

“No way! I’m going to try to get through too!” Shizuka said, holding up her arms in an x mark. “I do not want to be left behind here, and besides, I don’t think either of us checked how much air we still have in those tanks. It wouldn’t surprise me if there isn’t enough air to get either of us back where we came from in the first place.”

Cursing, Saeko pushed around the other woman, racing to check that very thing. She was not, unfortunately, surprised to note that Shizuka’s warning on that score was all too accurate. The air pressure gauge on her scuba equipment showed at being about a quarter of a tank, while Shizuka’s was even lower. Looking over the other woman, she nodded grimly. “We’re going to have to make our way forward and hope to find another way out, then.”

Thinking quickly, Saeko pulled out the bag containing her phone from her ki space. Pulling out the phone, she grimaced as she noticed the lack of bars in the corner. *Damn it.* Setting that aside, Saeko knelt by the water, using her mask as a makeshift container, using Shizuka’s to do the same.

“Shizuka, could you splash these into the cleft area for me. Make the splash over as small an area as you can, please.” With her sword in hand, Saeko waited, watching as the nurse obeyed. The water splashed down, and looking closely, Saeko could see where the water seemed to seep in between the rock at certain points. When she did, Saeko lashed out with her blade into the ground.

There was a *Shpang* noise as the light blade cut into the rock covering the trap, and when Saeko reached forward to pull off a portion of the rock, she saw a marlin spike or something similar waiting to be pushed upwards through magical or mechanical means. Saeko couldn’t tell around the spike but figured it was a tossup anyway. *Those oar traps were magical, almost certainly, and the lightning sword things were mechanical.* “Well, that worked.”

Slowly, with Shizuka going back for more water several times, Saeko was able to, with a good deal of effort and twisting around, to destroy most of the traps in the narrow area. Once that was done, Saeko used one hand to help the chest band Shizuka had put around her to press her chest as tightly against her as Saeko could, then began to slink forward.

Soon, Saeko was able to eventually push her upper body halfway through the narrow area until her head stuck out the other side over the last bit of area with traps. There was a strange feeling in the air when she did so, but no threat on the other side she could sense. Oddly, though, the walls here in this area didn't seem to have any kind of mural or decoration.

Even the sides of the cleft did, a series of Mongolian heads and broken weapons. And, admittedly, a few other strange-looking heads that resembled oni and other mystical creatures. Including a rather lifelike horse demon's head right beside where Saeko's was at present. *Stop looking at me!*

More worrisome than the horse demon head staring at her, Saeko couldn't quite get her body entirely through. She estimated she wouldn't be able to even if she removed the final traps, which were too far away for her sword to reach with any space to actually swing. Kneeling down was also impossible in the enclosed space.

I might be able to force myself through, over the traps, but there is no way Shizuka will be able to fit through here, let alone deal with them. And she's right. I can't just leave her here and hope to find an exit somewhere on my own. And there's also the fact I could get hurt again more seriously. Those lightning-shaped blades cut me despite Ranma's training, which is not a good sign.

Pushing her way back, Saeko gently asked Shizuka to move out into the area right above the water, giving Saeko room to swing. With her light weapon, she began to slowly and methodically carve chunks of the narrow area away. Each time she did, she looked around, waiting for some kind of divine fury to fall upon her or just for the entire tunnel to collapse inward and crush the pair of them. Taking out the traps would have been fair play in her mind. Cutting into the actual tunnel, not so much. However, nothing seemed to happen.

I suppose that even magical wards and well-made mechanical traps can both run out of power. Or they just didn't think that anyone would be able to carve through solid steel reinforced stone like this, Saeko mused, having come to what was undoubtedly a bar of some kind of metal running through the side of the narrow cleft.

Eventually, she had enough space for herself to walk sideways through comfortably and hoped that would be enough for Shizuka. The work on clearing the last of the traps began, and then Saeko was through to the other side.

Shizuka followed her, but Saeko must not have cut away as much as she should because, about halfway through, Shizuka yelped. The next second, she cried out, "Drat it, I'm stuck!"

This forced Saeko to reach back in and pull Shizuka forward despite the woman's protest. "Ah, ow, Saeko-chan, stopppp that hurrrrT!"

Saeko ignored this and continued pulling her forward. The next moment, Shizuka's bathing suit tore, but she was free of the small obstruction and fell out of the narrow area to her knees next to the swordswoman. She shrieked, grabbing at the edge of her swimsuit and trying desperately to hold it in place. "Oooh, come on, Saeko-chan! You should be more careful."

"It was either let it be torn or let you be stuck there. Priorities, please, Shizuka. After all, you don't see me complaining," Saeko drawled, shaking her head at the other woman's attitude. "Use some of those strange hourglass things to hold the sides of your suit together like you did with mine."

With a grumble, Shizuka reached down to her belt and the airtight medical bag there, doing so. As Shizuka was busy with that, Saeko looked around, frowning a bit, examining the walls and floor closely to make certain there weren't any traps. The area they were standing in rose into another series of stairs leading upward. Given the steepness of those steps, Saeko couldn't see up them more than six steps worth, which was worrisome.

After a moment, Shizuka was done, and the two women began to climb up the steps, with Shizuka muttering about having, "already had my leg day, drat it."

Saeko could relate. These steps were as tall as two or three normal ones, and each step up would be tough for a normal person. Saeko was not normal and was able to step up and concentrate on what was ahead of them, which was why she saw the change from natural stone to worked stone ahead of them. It was almost as if the stairs and the little area below had served as another Ma territory, a band of nothing to separate and bring emphasis to what had gone before.

The worked stone here was in the shape and color of clouds. Above and to both sides, there were storm clouds, their color dark gray. The bumps and curves made it hard to see if there were any hidden traps, which did not make Saeko very happy, and she ordered Shizuka to stay at least four steps behind her as she climbed up, her weapon raised as the steps finally petered out. When they did, the stone underneath her feet also started to be carved into the shape of clouds.

For several moments, Saeko stood there, staring around her and then up at the ceiling, where an undoubtedly magical lamp of some kind hovered in the air, giving about as much light in the now far wider hallway than you would see on a cloudy day. The only difference was that she could actually see what was causing the light rather than needing to turn away from the sun as it shone through real clouds. The effect was still quite striking, though, and she took a moment to smile in relief, setting aside her flashlight and just basking in what felt like the first rays of the sun after hours of being underground.

Shizuka eventually was able to join her, huffing and puffing, mumbling about how her thighs and knees hurt, before looking around them in surprise. "Oh, this is nice!"

“So is that,” Saeko answered, pointing ahead of them. At the far end, or perhaps the middle? For some reason, it was hard to tell where the large hallway ended. Regardless, ahead of them, around eighty feet away, stood a plinth of simple stone carved to resemble a hand thrust up, holding a weapon in its firm grip. From here, Saeko couldn’t make out many details, but it was clearly an odachi in shape. “I believe that is what we are here for.”

That wasn’t all that Saeko could see. Somehow, she wasn’t certain how, but the light from above from the strange magical lamp reflected off of that sword up into almost exact simulacrum in various areas around the hallway. Or at least, she thought they were simple magical illusions at first. As she examined them, that belief quickly faded, as each blade seemed to shift in her eyes, with four changing dramatically. *More magic, obviously.*

One of the images, or copies? Saeko wasn’t certain. Again. Regardless, one image was missing everything but the hilt. Another looked like it had been hacked to pieces, chunks missing along its length. That wasn’t unusual though, since in war, swords often did begin to wear over repeated use.

The last two were much more unusual. One was simply gone. The area where it should be in the circle of images/copies, judging by the position of the others, was just not there. *Hmm... that could be bad.*

The final copy/image looked as if it had been put in some superhot fire, the edge of it melting away like wax. The hilt, in contrast, looked almost pristine, if not for what looked like ash marks on it.

Staring at that one in particular, Saeko remembered what Rias had said about the weapon that the devil had apparently found in the area here and wondered. “So, was the monk right, only, the copy wasn’t created by that ancient Lucifer clan member, but here? Six copies, and one original...matching the number of drums in Raijin’s den-den daiko set.” Saeko suddenly realized. “Interesting, and almost undoubtedly significant in some fashion.”

She hadn’t realized she’d spoken aloud until Shizuka nodded. “I think it could be, although what will happen if you actually pick up what looks to be the real one, I don’t know. But why do I think that getting all the way over there is not going to be easy?”

“Because the pattern has been rather obvious up to this point,” Saeko said dryly before she began to step forward.

OOOOOOO

Ranma remained watching the hole for several hours. It wasn’t fun, knowing that even if Saeko ran into trouble, Ranma wouldn’t be able to get to her to help. She tried to push through the defensive barrier over the tunnel several times. Even once coming out of the Umi-Sen-Ken to use a point-blank Yama-Sen-Ken move, lowering the power to a single slice of vorpal energy.

The blade of energy cut through, and he could hear it cutting a chunk out of the tunnel, but it didn't do anything to the barrier, and she quickly pulled the technique over herself, hoping that anyone who had spotted her would assume it was his imagination.

Finally, Ranma could take it no longer. *I ain't doing any good just sitting here waiting for them. I'll head over and join the others. Even just sittin' around listening ta Rias and Asia talk magical theory or whatever is better than this.* Standing up quickly, she dove off the rock, heading towards the shore. Since the impact of the water removed her Umi-Sen-Ken (the technique couldn't handle being in a medium like water), Ranma dove down underneath the water, holding her breath as long as she could as she raced towards the shoreline. She was well within the normal swimming area before she had to surface again and continued on quickly.

Changing in the same public changing areas that they had broken into the night before, once he left the changing area, Ranma took to the rooftops, where he promptly took a moment to change back into his male body. Sighing in relief as the hot water cascaded down over her head changing him back into his male form for the first time that day, shivering just a bit as it also reminded him of his time with Saeko.

With that done, Ranma sent a quick text to Rias about how it was going and then leaped up onto the nearest rooftop, making his way towards where his phone's map told him the temple Rias and the others had gone to. *I know Rias-chan said she didn't want me ta meet this Linfai guy, but it's better to be closer regardless of how fast I can go, right? Ugh... and I suppose I can transform back into my female form before entering. That and my whole Ranko thing should be enough.*

Almost immediately, though, Ranma's thoughts on that score faded, and he scowled a bit, feeling someone's eyes on him. Looking around, Ranma didn't see anything at first, only to pause as movement on a rooftop to his left and forward of his current position drew his eyes.

There, on one of the tallest buildings in the city, a semi-familiar silver-haired young man with black pants, a good black shirt and silver accessories sat, seemingly enjoying a bowl of ramen. He had been looking out across the city and now had turned toward Ranma. Slurping up the last of his noodles, he set the bowl aside with several dozen other bowls before jumping down onto another roof directly ahead of Ranma's course.

Ranma slowed his pace stopping on a nearby roof, staring hard across at the other man. "You're that white dragon ass hole that tried to interrupt our killing that even bigger ass hole, Koka-whatever-his-name-was. What the hell are you doing here?"

"Since my destined rival seems so weak at the moment, it's left me needing to find someone else to fight. I can't fight a devil because I'm part of the Grigori. I can't fight an angel for the same reason. I don't want a war I just want to fight. That leaves me with very few options, and guess whose name is at the top of the list," Vali Lucifer, adopted son of the

Governor General of Grigori said, smirking at Ranma. "With men like us, that's enough of a reason."

While part of Ranma thought this was suspicious as all hell, the combat junkie in him had to nod his head in agreement. If this guy just wanted to fight strong opponents and couldn't because of politics, well, it would sure as hell piss Ranma off if that was the case. Nonetheless, he pulled out his phone, holding up a finger to the other guy, who waited politely as he sent off a quick text to Rias splinting what was going on. Then he tucked back in, crossed his arms and stared at Vali. "Unless you can throw up one of those dimensional bubble things, can I ask that we remove this fight to the nearest national park or something? I'm not interested in causing collateral damage."

Vali snorted at that. "I can, but I'm not interested in fighting in a cityscape, regardless. Come on."

Turning away, he gestured at Ranma as devil wings burst from his back. He floated up into the air, his body shimmering for a moment as he covered himself with an invisibility spell for those who didn't know about magic. "I've been waiting for this ever since you and the rest made me fail my mission for Azazel."

Ranma shrugged his shoulders and followed the other guy, hopping along the roots after him, wondering how this was going to go. Not realizing that Diodora was actually quite a bit sleazier and had far more connections than anyone in the Underworld supposed.

Below, Augusti watched as the two combatants raced off before pulling out her phone and, like Ranma a moment before, sent off a quick text message.

End Chapter

So this arc isn't going to be very long, but I figured to split up the three segments like this. Vali and Ranma's fight is not going to go the way either of them expects, while Rias decides that there's only so much diplomacy she's willing to use when dealing with an obvious enemy. I am still debating on if Asia should be able to start using magic herself, with the pretext that having a Sacred Gear gives Asia small magical reserves, or go into more mystical/faith-based magic like the Shinto priests can do, only using her own faith in God. We will see.