

Howdy all. I don't own and can't draw.

This was the winner of the Ranma June poll. It isn't my best work, a short amount of time to devote to it after *Heroes of the High Seas* went to nearly 50,000 words. That, and babysitting. Working on a computer is awfully hard to do when you have to watch a little wiggle monster at the same time.

This has been seen by Hiryo now, although I didn't Grammarly it. Enjoy!

Chapter 21: Shocks, Surprises and Alarums

Saeko shivered, arousal and battle lust filling her from the top of her head to her toes. Those feelings merged with the feeling of, well, Saeko's imagination likened the feeling to being caged lightning almost, simmering just under her skin, strongest in the hand holding Shinrai no Ha but yet also part of her entire being. Shinrai no Ha sat there, an image at the back of her mind, in her body, attached to Saeko's soul and body in a way that she could not truly understand. Saeko simply didn't have the magical understanding to describe the feeling.

However, the blade accepted Saeko, the blade accepted her. Despite her sadism, her near blind desire for violence and self-destructive bloodletting, Shinrai no Ha had agreed to become Saeko's weapon, thanks to her willpower and her faith. That was enough.

Now that she was consciously calling on the blade's power, though, there was also a strange feeling as if she had paid to wield Shinrai no Ha in some way. Something fundamental had been taken from her in exchange, something **deep**, personal and important. What that could be, Saeko had no idea, nor, really, did she care. That was a problem for future Saeko Busujima. Now it was time to have fun. Licking her lips, Saeko's eyes flashed, and she surged forward.

To Asia, the battered Rika and the watching priests, it looked as if she had teleported in a clap of lightning towards Diodora. Even Diodora could barely follow her movement as she zipped in. Still, he was able to raise a hand. An aura of magic grew around Diodora from the tattoo behind his ear encompassed his body, blocking the incoming swing as he intercepted it with his hand.

Saeko moved with the riposte, which to her had felt as if she had just hit a physical shield of some kind, coming back in again from the side. A strike flicked out, forcing Diodora's aura to burst out again. This twirl led into a kick, the sword's energy traveling down Saeko's body with a crackle of lightning tinted a sky blue.

Even as Diodora was shielded from her attack again, Saeko noticed that her kick didn't carry as much energy as her attack with the blade. *So there are limitations, good to know, she*

thought, her lips twitching into an ecstatic, bloodthirsty grin as her next strike cut across Diodora's shoulder.

Grimacing, Diodora was barely able to keep up. The tattoo bestowed upon his very soul by Ophis the Infinite Dragon God gave Diodora all the power he wanted, but his eyes and reflexes were not in sync. He could track Saeko but was unable to react quite quickly enough to stop her own attacks. It was only because his tattoo's magic automatically flared out to defend him that kept Diodora from being sliced to pieces as Saeko pressed him hard, her sadistic smile doing almost as much as her attacks to throw Diodora off. *Damn it, what is with this bitch?!*

Saeko, however, wasn't used to her new abilities. Along with the wind at her back and the lightning in her strikes, there was a kind of, of lightness to her movements, as if there was a wind pressure building up behind her between one strike and the next. At times, there was also a pulling feeling between her strikes, as if Shinrai no Ha was trying to tell Saeko something. The shape of the blade, its weight and the fact it was double bladed were things that Saeko's training and raw ability with the sword could overcome.

Suddenly finding her foot slamming down on a sudden bit of cloud that appeared out of nowhere instead of the temple's grounds was not.

Between one step and the next, Saeko's attacks faltered, and as quick as a snake, Diodora capitalized. A battering ram of magic flashed out from his chest, uncoordinated and unshaped, but powerful, slamming into Saeko and tossing her backward. Yet to his shock, Saeko took the blast and was not simply incinerated or pulped into tiny pieces.

Groaning as she pushed herself to her knees, Saeko blinked, taking in the sight of her forearm and hand. That hand and forearm should have been healthy tanned skin. Instead, it looked almost like stone. *Or steel, maybe? It seems as if Shinrai no Ha has gifted me with more abilities than just speed and lightning.*

Rolling forward, Saeko dodged underneath a spinning disc of magical energy that oddly reminded her of a certain bald anime character's signature attack then was up on her feet once more. *Now, let me see if... AH!* Two steps and her foot landed not on the ground but on a conjured-up cloud. Consciously summoning it up was hard, the effort nearly causing Saeko's eyes to cross, but it worked enough to get her close to Diodora again before he could back away.

His yelp of shock as her blade slashed into his forearm. His Ophis-given power flared out in a protective aura once more, but this time seemed to shimmer as it did.

"Fucking bitch!" Diodora snarled, lashing out again, only to miss as Saeko rolled to one side, blade flicking out toward Diodora's leg. Once more, the strange energy from the tattoo flashed, catching her blade, but this time, it wasn't quite fast enough, and a long gash opened along Diodora's lower leg before Saeko rose into another strike, which Diodora blocked with his power again. For just a moment, his eyes flicked down to her swimsuit-clad chest, which

bounced and shifted with every movement, only to nearly squawk as Saeko's foot nearly caught him in the fork, missing by a bare inch.

Rias stared at this from the sideline for several minutes, stunned by the changes that had come over Saeko since she had last seen her last night. *The lightning was the only thing I thought she might be able to do once she found that sword!* Worse, that power was certainly holy, but not in a way that Rias had personally run into before this. It reminded her more of the wards of the Shinto temple they were currently in than the feeling of a Sacred Gear, although admittedly Rias had yet to run into any Sacred Gears whose nature gave them Light or Holy based magical effects. Regardless, she knew that it would probably pain a normal Devil to touch, let alone be the target of, much like an angel or fallen's Light Lance. *Although Diodora is probably more than strong enough to ignore that aspect, much like I would be.*

She continued to watch, the academic side of her cataloguing each new power that Saeko had developed since gaining ownership of Shinrai no Ha. Well, a portion of her mind was involved in that. The rest of her mind, especially her emotional portion, was thankful for the sudden reprieve, and had trouble stopping her eyes from flicking down Saeko's body, or to her lips when she licked them occasionally as she fought Diodora. There was something incredibly sexy about Saeko right now, and while a large portion of that had to do with her current clothing (Saeko was still wearing her sporty swimsuit) that wasn't the entire reason. *Although I have to say, I'm glad that she is enjoying the fight just more than the pain she's causing. I do not need another Akeno in my life and certainly don't need to be romantically involved with one!*

The redhead's eyes narrowed suddenly as Diodora blasted point-blank shot of raw magic, making the same academic side of Rias' mind that was analyzing Saeko's new abilities wonder how long he could keep that kind of output up. The next second, Rias shook her head, banishing all such disjointed mental processes to concentrate on something far more important. *No way am I going to let Saeko just swoop in and finish this battle on her own!*

Having blasted Saeko away again, Diodora turned his attention to Asia and the others in front of the battered, damaged temple. He raced towards them, his aura of power coalescing into some kind of spell, although Rias couldn't discern the spell. What he planned, she didn't know, but her first blast impacted the ground in front of him, causing him to stop.

In turning his attention away from her, Diodora had made the mistake of assuming that Saeko would at least need a few seconds to recover. She didn't, and before he could do anything Shinrai no Ha stabbed into his back, just barely missing his spine, stabbing into him before his defensive aura could respond. Blood burst out of Diodora's mouth as he wrenched himself forward off of the blade, swinging around a blast of cutting force magic in a wide arc, stomping on the ground to send out a wave of magic at the same time. This halted Rias' continued attacks as Saeko was forced to duck under the cutting spell.

As she rose to her full height again, Saeko noticed that the wound she had just caused was already healing, Diodora's magical aura flaring around the wound and glowing an even deeper shade of green than it had been before.

"Yes!" Saeko hissed, coming in again, her eyes wide, an expression that Rias could only call a slasher smile appearing on her face. It was clear that she was taking a near sexual thrill from the battle so far, not only reminding Rias again of her best friend and queen, but also a conversation that she'd once had with Ranma about Saeko following the battle against Kokabiel. "More! Put up more of a fight, struggle, let me have more fun!"

Oh dear, what was it? Rias thought, even as she used power of destruction defensively, obliterating a magical attack as he came towards her Rika and the priests. *What was it, that Saeko had gotten into the fight so much, was enjoying herself so much she ignored her own wounds? I suppose it should be thankful for small mercies in that unlike Akeno, she doesn't like causing pain outside of fighting. I don't think I could deal with dating that kind of sadist.*

"Damn you! I am the sadist here," Diodora roared, his thoughts paralleling Rias' in an odd way, almost seeming to take offense at how much enjoyment Saeko was getting from fighting him like this. His Magical Aura came out from all around him, the dragon tattoo flaring all around his body again to fuel the spell, as well as help him regenerate from his recent stabbing. "I will have my prize! Whatever power up you have been given will not be enough, and I will take my pleasure breaking both you and Argento alike! The Saint I will keep and bend to my will but you--"

"Ooohh~~," Saeko moaned interrupting Diodora's diatribe. While she didn't know if this was deliberate or just Saeko being who she was, the sound still caused Rias to feel a little hot under cover, while beside her Asia blushed and crossed herself and the priests began to perform prayers. "I was hoping you would say that!"

Watching the two of them fight, Rias realized that Diodora had somewhat adapted to Saeko's in-your-face style of combat by this point. The power of his strange tattoo, and oh boy did Rias have questions about that, also allowed him enough raw power to keep Rias at bay. Keeping his magical aura out around his hands and forearms, he began to block and parry most of Saeko's attacks, lashing out with shorter controlled bursts of magical power.

In return, Saeko's strange gray like skin armor appeared, protecting her whenever she was struck. Whereas that raw magical power only could batter Saeko aside like it was a physical impact, her attacks were lightning based. This too was having an impact, something Rias realized after watching for a few minutes. Holding up a shield of power of destruction against the wave of magic that Diodora sent her way, obliterating it, Rias voiced her thoughts. "Diodora's slowing down... or maybe that strange power of his is giving out."

Odd to think of any magical power a devil uses as odd, but in this case, the term fits, Rias thought ruefully. *It seemed to come from a part of his head behind his ear, and not from Diodora*

himself. It isn't a Sacred Gear, I don't think, yet what else could it be? Some kind of magical artifact or... hmmm... maybe a tattoo?

"How can you tell?" Asia asked quizzically, staring at the fight, her hands clasped around her rosary. Whether or not she was praying for Saeko's victory or soul, Rias didn't know and wasn't about to inquire. At the moment, both were equally likely.

"Watch his limbs when one of Saeko's attacks hits Diodora's aura shield. The whole limb shivers and shakes like it's been electrocuted, the same getting around the shield," Rias explained. "Electrical damage like that doesn't hit just where the point of impact is, it needs to earth itself, and in this case, that means transferring into the rest of Diodora's body. Even better, that strange Dragon tattoo needs to heal all of the electrical damage, not just the initial cut."

A second later, Diodora's attack on Rias and the temple behind her ended. Rias instantly charged forward, getting around Diodora's side, forcing him to turn so he could keep both Rias and Saeko in his line of sight at the same time. After erasing a few smaller magical attacks from existence, Rias launched several more Power of Destruction blasts fleshed out from Rias' outstretched hand, forcing Diodora to dodge. He had just carried Saeko's blade out of position, and had actually succeeded in grabbing her forearm, but while he saw Rias' attack fade, he missed a sneaky kick coming up into the side of his knee, the kick getting through before Diodora's protective shield could activate.

"AHH!" Diodora hissed, his grip on Saeko's forearm releasing. Saeko then sliced down his chest in a quick recovery, but Diodora raised both of his hands, creating a pushing motion right into Saeko's chest, his hands actually pressing into her breasts as he blasted her with a magical strike again. Saeko was sent flying, slamming into and through several trees, but she rolled as she hit, coming up with a fierce grin on her face, and then zipping forward with all the speed of lightning.

Meanwhile, blasting Saeko away had once more taken Diodora's attention completely away from Rias, something he realized the second too late. Diodora had never been in any real, pitched battle like this when he was forced to face multiple opponents, both of whom could hurt him, and that lack of training was costing the Astaroth-born spy.

He was still able to dodge most of her attack, but it caught him in the lower leg, removing his calf and foot. The Power of Destruction made it as if that portion of his body had ceased to exist between one second and the next, dumping him to the ground.

"NOOOO!!" Diodora shrieked, blasting Rias away with another role burst of magic, but it seemed as if the magic imbued into whatever it was behind Diodora's ear had finally reached its limits. The Asiatic dragon aura appeared all around him, then began to disappear, infusing into his body once more. Diodora stared at his aura, his eyes wide and panicking, his leg still not healed, and then, Saeko's next slash took him across the chest again, hurling him back off his back, and opening up a long gash across his chest.

Before he could recover from that, Saeko was astride him, intent on stabbing him through the chest down into the ground, pinning him there with Shinrai no Ha.

"Don't kill him!" Rias shouted. "We need him alive!"

Breathe heaving, Saeko changed the target of her strike. Instead of stabbing Diodora in the head or upper chest, she stabbed him through the upper arm on the opposite side of the ear from behind which Diodora's power up had come. The blade punched through his body and deep into the ground, pinning him there as the lightning caused Diodora to scream and convulse. Within seconds, his eyes rolled back in his head as Diodora's body finally gave out on him and he blacked out.

"Why didn't you want me to kill him?" Saeko grumbled as she pushed to her feet, her chest heaving in such a way that Rias had to keep her eyes from wandering, her face aroused almost to the point where Rias wondered exactly how close Saeko was to achieving the clouds and rain.

I bet if I just ran a finger along her collarbone right now, or better, smacked her on the rear that it'd be enough to know, bad Rias! Time enough for that kind of thing later, when Saeko's up to taking our relationship further. Still it would be hilarious t-no! At least not in front of Linfai, his priests or Asia. If it was just Rika, maaaaybe...

Face flushing a little, from where her thoughts had gone, Rias shook her head. "It's not that I want him alive, really, it's that we can't let Diodora die. While I don't particularly care about politics anymore that doesn't mean that I want to make trouble for my big brother. This conflict has all the material needed to become of diplomatic disaster. It could be skewed that we basically came into Astaroth territory in order to kill the heir of the family and take the area over. Considering that kind of fighting is forbidden, takeovers like that are supposed to happen in Rating Games, which would be very bad."

She frowned then, glaring down at Diodora. Since Saeko had pulled her blade out of the wound in his upper arm, Rias could see that he wasn't in any danger of bleeding out anytime soon. Shinrai no Ha's blade having cauterized the wound significantly. Rias knelt down, turning his head and looking behind his ear, frowning at the sight of the small tattoo there. It looked almost faded, the shape and color barely visible, but it was there. "There's also a few questions that need to be answered about this strange magical tattoo he has hidden here. I only hope it isn't actually gone entirely, rather simply going back into a dormant state."

Still kneeling, Rias looked over her shoulder towards the priests. "I don't suppose that you would have anything that could seal away his magic powers for a time?"

"We have a few talismans that can block magical power, or keep someone unconscious for a time so long as their own magical defenses can't stop it from working," the elderly priest stated, nodding his head firmly. "Will he revive if Asia heals him?"

"If by that you mean wake up, probably not, but I'm not going to let Asia heal him until Diodora's in custody," Rias stated firmly, watching as Saeko slowly withdrew the blade from where it had pinned Diodora down like a fly on a piece of paper. "And you my dear, the moment we get back to Kuoh, I'm going to put you through so many magical tests it's going to make your head spin!"

Saeko chuckled at that, but whatever response she would have made went unsaid, as a loud yowl was heard from one side, and Linfai twitched, scowling a bit. "Someone just got past the outer wards."

Saeko and Rias looked at one another, but a moment later, another yowl, this one sounding like a happy one, if from a cat the size of a tiger came from one side. Looking in that direction, the two saw Ranma stalking out of the small copse of trees around the temple. In addition, unlike his normal inherently poised, lazily athletic movements, he was on all fours stalking forward like a cat rather than a person.

Saeko, Rias and Rika all stared. "Ranma...oh, dear, what happened to put him into the Neko-Ken?" Rias muttered, with Saeko nodding agreement. Rika and the others, bar Asia who was busy healing Mousse, looked completely confused, staring at the two of them then over to where Ranma was prowling towards them on all fours, his expression scrunched up almost to the point where it resembled a house cat. "It's a response to some very odd martial arts training. Don't worry, he's a friend, aren't you, Ranma?" Rias cooed, waving a hand towards Ranma.

Neko-Ranma yowled again, his eyes locked on his mates. He had been having an amusing time bouncing around the rooftops at first, having chased after Annoying Purple into the man thing area. Yet soon after they had begun to move over the tall human things, Ranma had lost sight of Annoying Purple, and then lost the trail entirely thanks to all of the different man thing smells. After chasing after a few pigeons, he had decided to go in search of his mates, remembering where the redheaded mate had gone along with she who must be protected, the little littermate with fur of yellow and a sunshine smile.

Now, having arrived, it looked like a fight had just hit ended, something that annoyed Neko-Ranma a little. Fights were fun, and missing out on fun was never something that Neko-Ranma enjoyed. However, seeing his mates standing over what must've been an enemy tom made Neko-Ranma. They had proven their strength, which was good, Neko-Ranma reflected, moving forward. Almost as good as the fact that Steel Rose enjoyed it so much. Her musk was heavy in the air and he yowled again.

This time the sound was deeper, more masculine, almost. Ranma had been enjoying himself immensely today, and while he felt very, very tired, he could think of a way to end this day that would shift from just a good day to a spectacular one. And it was not finding a nice sunbeam to nap in.

“*Giggle* You know, while he described the Neko-Ken to us, this is a lot more amusing looking, and cute too, than I expected,” Saeko said, holding out her free hand towards Ranma as he came towards them, stalking forward like a cat mixed with his normal practicality beyond human grace. Her other hand still held the Shinrai no Ha and gave no sign of wanting to release it anytime soon.

“Well, yes, but I’m wondering more why Ranma is in that form in the first place,” Rias pondered, absentmindedly kicking Diodora as she saw his eyes begin to flutter despite her earlier words about him probably not being able to recover consciousness so quickly. Her foot caught him in the temple with enough force to knock him back out, and she turned her attention back to Ranma.

Looking at him closely, she saw that Ranma’s clothing had suffered a lot, with what looked like burn marks and slashes cut into it in various places. His back in particular was somewhat shredded. “I know that he hasn’t been training very long with Koneko on getting a handle on the Neko-Ken, but before he began that training, he said it takes direct, extended contact with a cat to trigger the mental breakdown, not just looking at them or seeing them from afar to do anything.”

Instead of replying, Saeko giggled again as Ranma first licked at her hand, then shifted around her body, winding in between her legs in a way that made her laugh again. He then head-butted the back of her knees, causing her to eep, as she fell forward onto her hands. She was still laughing, though, until he nipped at the back of her neck from behind, his body pressing down into her.

Then Saeko’s eyes widened, even as Ranma looked over to Rias. “He isn’t...”

“I, I think he is...” Rias stated, also staring wide-eyed, forgetting their audience for a moment. “Is that because he can tell how much fun you’ve been having, or because he’s just showing affection?”

Gazing up at Rias and seeing her look of wide-eyed shock, Ranma shrugged his shoulders. While Redhead’s human-type outer layer of fur had been badly damaged in the fight recently, it was clear by her scent that Redhead hadn’t enjoyed it, unlike Steel Rose. She was more than ready, and Neko-Ranma purred throatily as he nuzzled into the back of her neck again, before nipping at her skin again.

Saeko whimpered a little at that touch. Her body was still on fire from her reaction to the fight earlier, and Ranma was gentle, if strangely catlike ministrations were... not exactly unwelcome to her aroused hind brain. However, she still tried to push him away, despite that, tapping him on the nose with two fingers. “No Ranma! Absolutely not. This is not the time or the place...” her words trailed off as he nuzzled into her hand, licking her fingers.

“That, that boy, is he possessed of some kind of cat demon?” the uninjured young priest murmured, while Asia flushed hotly, trying hard to concentrate on healing the other junior priest’s leg. She very much was not trying to watch the goings on out of the corner of her eye. No Sir. Although Asia did make a note of how she’d need to perform a few Hail Mary before going to bed that night.

Mousse, on the other hand, was not having any of this erotic/romantic nonsense. “For the love of the Kami, Ranma, just stop!” he grumbled, pulling out a large water bottle and hurling it forward. The bottle’s top opened, dumping its contents over Ranma and Saeko alike.

While being splashed by water was one of the surefire ways of breaking Ranma out of the Neko-ken, unfortunately, Mousse hadn’t realized that Saeko was still holding a sword that, in a way, resembled more of a lightning bolt than an actual blade of metal. Even though it wasn’t currently giving off electrical discharges, lightning was still playing through its surface.

Instantly both Ranma and Saeko lit up like Christmas trees.

“YEOEOOW!!!” Ranma howled, along with Saeko letting loose a moan that had every man there going cross-eyed, even the elderly priest. Being bonded to the Shinrai no Ha, the tingle had only been this side of pleasant, enough to rev Saeko’s engines even more but not quite, to her barely hidden chagrin, to finish the job. Meanwhile, Ranma had barely a second to register the fact that he was female and leaning against Saeko’s back in a very non-PG manner before she twitched, spasmed and fell to one side, where she continued to twitch for a bit.

Rias instantly knelt at her side, reaching out, the lightning doing little for her, although she had to admit she was surprised the jolt of electricity was doing anything to Ranma to given his durability. *Or does he not have any built-up defense against attacks that hit his nerves?* “Ranma, are you all right?”

Ranma barely had enough energy to look up at her, but she did, whispering out, “W, w, well t, t, that w, w, was s, s, shocking...” before her eyes rolled back in her head and she fell back, completely out of it.

“Is he all right? Do you think I should heal him?” Asia asked, looking at Ranma and also looking incredibly embarrassed what she had caused. Indeed, Twilight Healing was already on her finger, ready and waiting to be used.

However, Rias waved that off as Shizuka finally came forward from where she had been crouching near the well. “No, we’ll let Ranma sleep it off, I think. Beyond having been in the Neko-ken, Ranma also looks battered. I think just getting some sleep is going to be good for him... er, her. Besides, hopefully by the time we he wakes up we’ll be done with Diodora and my brother so Ranma won’t be able to...” Rias paused, thinking avoid put it. “Add his own brand of chaos to what might be a difficult diplomatic issue.”

Saeko, Rika and Asia all looked at one another, then nodded as one, even Asia. Say what you would about Ranma, but he did tend to complicate things in odd ways.

"Right, so, how are we going to deal with this asshat, then?" Rika asked.

Turning, Rias addressed the priests. "You said something about ways to keep Diodora from accessing his magic?"

"We can create kotodama-based tethers," Linfai agreed, looking up from where he had gone to his knees and was writing on a talisman already. "Singly, they won't last long. Shinto wards of this nature only effect you devils up to a certain degree since there's the difference in power to consider. Enough magical power simply overwhelms any natural defenses or intrinsic weakness you, you all..."

Linfai's voice trailed off as his eyes strayed sideways to Shizuka as the nurse burst out of the woods from the same direction Saeko had appeared from moments before. She raced over to Rika, glomping the policewoman who was nearly knocked off her feet, only experience with her girlfriend letting her keep her feet under her. The two women's chests pressed into one another, Shizuka's breasts popping out of the sides of her swimsuit even more than they had been previously. So much so, that Mousse had to turn away quickly, holding a hand up to his suddenly bleeding nose.

"Rika-chan! This is kind of cool, I mean, I'd have preferred we didn't come out right into a fight like this, but seeing you right here almost makes up for it! Where are we? Oooh boy, do I have a story to tell you. There were traps, dangers, puzzles, barriers and then a whole mess of lightning, with Busujima-chan in the center! You should have seen my hair it was frizzing all over the place just from being within a dozen yards of it."

As Shizuka babbled, the elderly priest's eyes weren't the only ones who had twitched over to Shizuka. Even Rias had to admit to some jealousy. Shizuka's curves made even adult devils seem less 'blessed' in comparison. *Hah, I can't wait until Akeno meets Shizuka in person! That's going to be hilarious.* Akeno had always been so pleased with herself when it came to her chest size, being bigger even than Rias' mother and Grayfia. Meeting Shizuka was going to puncture that confidence for certain.

For now, though, seeing the acetic Shinra Clan monks all staring at her even as they tried not to was while amusing, a bit of a distraction. "**Ahem**, you were saying, Linfai?"

"Er, um, yes..." Linfai muttered, finally tearing his eyes away from Shizuka as Rika pushed Shizuka away from her lightly. "Um, as I was saying, I think that we can stop Diodora from accessing his magic for a while. But that will be a finite thing."

"I can provide rope or other means to keep him tied up," Mousse volunteered, looking not at all guilty at what had happened to Ranma. Instead, he looked quite satisfied.

Rika patted Shizuka on the head, before covering her babbling girlfriend's mouth with a hand. "I've got a question on that point. That tattoo thing you mentioned, what the hell is it? It acted almost like the asshole had just doped himself up, with immediate results instead of slowly building ones."

That phrase flew over Rias' head for a second but she eventually got it. "Huh, you know, I have heard about what human-type drugs do to humans, but I've never seen examples of it." Drug addiction wasn't as big a problem in Japan as it was elsewhere in the world, and Kuoh Academy was very much not the kind of school where such things was an issue. "Regardless, you're right about that. That thing... I..."

Scowling and biting at her ahoge again, Rias idly kicked Diodora's head again. He had twitched, which was enough for her really, although the giggle that brought from Saeko made Rias smile.

Shaking that thought off, Rias turned her mind back to the current topic. "That tattoo reminds me of something that my brother once told me about the Khaos Brigade. I've never seen anything like it before though. But it is incredibly powerful," she trailed off worriedly. "That battle went from a clear victory for us to a loss the moment he began calling on it. Wherever that thing came from, it's dangerous."

"Right. So, I gotta wonder," Rika, with Shizuka clamping onto her side, made her way over to the temple. She came back holding one of the ex-exorcist light swords. The moment she held it in a certain way, the Holy Magic-based edge of the sword, more a large knife really, flickered on. "If it's an actual tattoo, it acts like the runes on a kotodama right? If something happens to the writing, it loses power?"

"Yes, but I don't want it to be destroyed," Rias held up her hand, glancing down at the now-unmoving Diodora. "My brother needs to see it, and if you destroy the physical matrix like that, it might simply dissolve entirely. It's definitely looking faded as it is" *I wish I had my scrying array here, both for that and to start examining Saeko, or at least a recording crystal. But wishing for such doesn't matter much at all, right now. I hope that Diodora's using it didn't cause it to dissipate entirely like a single-shot ward or curse on an object.*

Rika scowled a bit at that but nodded. "Makes sense. You want there to be some kind of evidence of that and what went on here, I suppose?" When Rias nodded, Rika went on, putting the dagger back in its sheath and wrapping the arm Shizuka had been clinging to around the ex-nurse again. "I gotta ask, though. On a scale of one to that fallen angel guy who led the assault on Kuoh, where did this man stack up?"

"Well below Kokabiel before the tattoo activated. After that, still below Kokabiel in terms of experience, but maybe equal in terms of power," Rias answered instantly.

Rika's scowl deepened at that, and she looked down at the Light-based dagger then shook her head. "I want some new weapons, damn it. If I'm going to be involved in the supernatural, I need a power up just like Saeko did, only way more so."

"Now now," Saeko intoned, shaking her head, "don't forget Rika, you're not a front-line fighter. I know you want more hitting power, but even someone like me, armed with Shinrai no Ha isn't up to some of the monster out there, apparently. Or do you think even Shinrai no Ha would let me fight Gabriel or Sona's sister?" *As amusing as it would be to try, I know my basic speed and skill aren't up to that level. Not yet, anyway. But I am nothing if not determined.*

"I think you need to remember that some fights are beyond you. And also..." Saeko smirked. "Remember how well your prior planning let you do at the start of the fight again Kokabiel's legion. That's where you and any other SAT-type person we deal with would thrive: planning and a prepared battlefield."

Tsking, Rika looked away. Honestly, she was still getting used to the fact there were people out there that thought bullets were the equivalent of rain, despite having seen it several times and even watching Ranma test out the majority of the SAT's normal goodies. "I'd hoped that these Blessed weapons or whatever the proper term is would make my guns able to do more, I guess."

"Maybe there's a way to make them, or rather your guns in general, better or more powerful. We can research that," Rias soothed, understanding where Rika was coming from. "But for now, let me send a message to my brother."

"Ano, do you want me to, to heal him?" Asia asked, looking down at the bandaged but still bleeding Diodora.

It was obvious to Rias that Asia had mixed feelings about offering, but that her general inability to ignore a wounded person was winning out over her dislike and fear of Diodora. "Not just yet, Asia-chan. Let Linfai and the other priests do what they can to keep him under control, then, when my brother arrives, you can heal him."

With that, she summoned up one of her bat familiars. It landed on her shoulder, and Rias held out her hands weaving them together. "Hush for now, I need to concentrate on this."

Moments later, a small teleportation circle appeared in front of her, the devil runes flashing out into an ever-growing circle, the Gremory sigil in the center. Rias grumbled a bit, biting her ahoge again. "Blast it all, opening a teleportation tunnel between Earth and the Underworld is hard in territory warded and controlled by another family. Next time I'll remember that, and we'll all just leave the area before I try it."

Despite her words, Rias eventually finished and then gestured to the resulting teleportation circle. It activated, and Rias looked at her familiar. She spoke to it for a time, then the bat leaped off her shoulder, moving into the teleportation tunnel before it winked out of existence. As it did, Rias turned only to stare.

The priests had been busy. With the two younger priests, one of whose legs had been grafted back on thanks to Asia's Twilight Healing, helping, and Mousse providing the rope, Linfai had covered Diodora from the neck down in a rope on which numerous kotodama had been hung. The rope and the kotodama wound around Diodora so tightly it made him look like a pinata ready to be hit. Even Asia had gotten into it, watching Linfai write out the words on the kotodama, while everyone bar Saeko and Ranma helped to wrap the rope around the Astaroth heir along.

When she felt Rias' eyes on her, Rika smirked a bit, ignoring Saeko's amused face from where she had shifted to place Ranma's head in her lap. "What? We just wanted to be thorough."

OOOOOOO

Slurping at his ramen, Vali was in his happy place. If there was one thing outside of fighting, training and arguing with his father that he truly enjoyed, it was trying new types of ramen. And by trying, Vali meant eating copious amounts of it.

Next to him, Bikou looked on, one giant bowl of Ramen in front of him, a paltry amount in comparison to the five in front of the silver haired young man. "Dude, this place had a challenge to eat one of their giant bowls, you didn't have to go all bottomless pit on me, man! I'm still going to have to pay for some of those you know."

Damn it, I can't believe I forgot how much ramen Vali can eat, Bikou whined internally.

Snorting, Vali shook his head. "You offered, Bikou, don't blame me for your poor memory. Although, I honestly don't think those bowls are much of a challenge."

"Yeah well, we've both got advantages most people don't," Bikou snorted. He blinked though as Vali's entire body jerked, and he looked around, wondering if they were being attacked somehow. He called down though as Vali reached into one of his pockets, pulling out his cell phone. "What the fuck? What kind of vibration sitting do you have on that," Bikou said, before grinning, waggling his eyebrows at the other man. "Inquiring minds want to know. You know that Kuroka might be a little annoyed with you if you have something like that and haven't introduced her to it yet."

"Shut up, I didn't do anything. This phone doesn't even **have** a vibrations function." Staring down at the phone he had retrieved from the forest floor at around the same time Bikou

had retrieved his staff, and seeing the caller ID, Vali's face shifted into a scowl. "And I know just who did do something to my phone."

With that, Vali flipped open the phone, and hit the call back button. Seconds later, his father's voice came from the phone. "Hey, ya little punk, I see that my little surprise on your phone worked."

"God dammit Pops, I thought the only thing you put on my phone was that damn timer to call in every three hours!"

"I never said that, you just assumed it," Azazel snickered. "It's not my fault you fell for the classic misdirection trick with the tracker in your shoe."

Bikou watched as Vali's face twisted into a snarl, although a snarl mixed in with a smirk. While their relationship seemed antagonistic a lot of the time on the surface, Bikou knew that Vali actually respected. Heck, although Bikou knew if he ever pointed this out, he'd probably be buried in the ocean floor, Bikou knew that Vali maybe even loved his adopted father. Certainly, he had a lot more feeling towards Azazel then he did towards his actual family, from what Bikou knew.

"Alright old man, you got me. Still, you wouldn't be calling just to gloat, not with the damn timer thing you've got me under too. What's up?"

"There's been a major incident in the Astaroth territory around Hakata in Japan. You wouldn't happen to be anywhere near there, would you?"

"Since I really doubt that putting a vibration function on my phone was the only thing you did while I wasn't looking at it, you probably know the answer to that one already. I'm not in Hakata, although I could be in a few minutes. Do you want me to be?" Vali asked.

"No, but I'm going to question you about why you're even that close when you get back."

Shrugging, Vali motioned Bikou to leave the booth for a second, pulling Bikou single large bowl of ramen over to his side of the table. As Bikou watched, quite deadpan, Vali took a picture of the six empty ramen bowls, and the one that still had some broth left in it. "A ramen place here was having an all-you-can-eat ramen competition. As I figured it wasn't actually in a devil's territory, simply close to one, I thought it would be fine."

As Bikou began to hold back snickers and slid back into his side of the booth, Azazel groaned. "Kid, I swear to the nameless entities of the beyond you eat that stuff like it's the next best thing to ambrosia. If you weren't a devil, you'd be the size of a blimp or dead from a heart failure no matter how much exercise you get."

"It isn't the next best thing to ambrosia. It is better, because ramen is real. Ambrosia is simply fake nonsense that the church tells people about heaven," Vali stated, with all the assurance of someone reminding someone else that the sky was blue

Shaking his head on the other side of the line, Azazel snorted. He didn't believe for a moment that ramen was the only reason why Vali was in that area, but so long as he didn't have anything to do with the actual incident within the Astaroth claimed territory of Hakata between the Astaroth clan and the Gremorys that was enough for Azazel. "Whatever. When are you going to get back here?"

"Give me another few hours, the other contestants don't seem to be slacking off. In fact, I'm losing my position in the contest talking to you," as he spoke, Vali made a point of slurping up the last of the broth.

Chuckling, Azazel said, "Fine, fine. I'll see you tonight. And don't try to get rid of this phone kid, that'll just means I'll have to get more creative about ways of tracking you."

Vali snorted that, then hung up, and without missing a beat, turned and asked for another bowl from a passing waiter. The woman's eyes widened as she stared at all of the extra extra-large bowls that Vali had already polished off, but she nodded and headed towards the kitchen. Catching Bikou's look, Vali shrugged. "What, after dealing with my old man, I deserve another bowl."

Bikou chuckled. "Never let it be said that you can't lie with the best of them or can't think on your feet. That was some smooth thinking there. Although if he is tracking you, that means there's no way you can head back to HQ for a while."

"No big loss there." Smirking slightly, Vali thanked the waitress as she set another bowl in front of them, picked up his chopsticks and began to eat. He didn't even wait for it to cool down like most people would have to, something he honestly thanked his devil side for. One of the very few things he thanked his devil side for. And it was always his devil side, not his actual family. He firmly believed that waiting until it cools down harmed the flavor of the ramen, and he would never allow that.

"So you think we got away with it?"

"Don't know. It will depend on what Ranma says to the Gremory girl. Neither of us made any mention of the KB, so he might just put it down to me being a combat junkie, and leave it at that. Although I'd wager anything considering the fact that Diodora would've done his best to bury anything happening in Hakata if he could, that call means our erstwhile ally has been taken." Vali sneered at little, shaking his head.

"Heh. Well, I can't say I ever liked that assbat," Bikou snorted.

It might have seemed odd to an outsider that Vali and Bikou didn't care at all about what happened to Diodora, yet to anyone inside the Khaos Brigade it would've made complete sense. The Khaos Brigade was not a united front. There were numerous different factions within it, and occasionally, they came into conflict just like the Three Factions created by the Abrahamic religion.

Cao Cao, who Ranma had met and who had tried to recruit the pigtailed martial artist, and Vali led two such factions, and they did not like one another at all. Bikou was technically part of Vali's faction, as was Kuroka, whereas the Hero Faction was led by humans who were descendants of ancient heroes who had seemingly, through chance or blood received Sacred Gears, to go with skills that hearkened back to their ancestors.

Diodora was not part of either of those factions, but rather a third faction, the Old Satan Faction. Despite the rise to prominence his clan had enjoyed since the downfall of the old Maou in the devil Civil War, he had thrown his lot in with those who wanted a return to the old days. In other words, it was absolutely no skin off of Bikou or Vali's nose if the guy had bought it. In fact, despite the fact that Diodora had called in a favor to get someone to come and sideline Ranma, very few of the rest of the Khaos Brigade would care much either.

At least, not about his demise. About what could be gleaned from his incarceration, that was a different story...

Around twenty minutes later, the two young men left the restaurant. From there, they soon headed up onto the rooftops. When they were out of sight of any of the normal humans below them, Vali began to open up a dimensional portal down to the Underworld, and Bikou summoned up Kinto'un, the magical cloud that he and his many times great grandfather could call upon. As he landed on its fluffy softness, Bikou turned to give Vali a wicked grin, knowing of a way to get under the other man's skin for costing him so much money. "By the way, when it comes to Ranma, dibs. I get to fight next."

Vali balked at that, nearly losing the spell. While fighting Ranma had been intensely annoying at times, it had also been exhilarating. Facing someone who was both that skilled and that tricky was outside of his previous experience, and it made Vali think things through in a way he had never had to do before, to say nothing of the fact that Albion couldn't give him nearly as much protection against ki attacks as normal. "No! Ddraig's user this time around is a useless waste of space so far, and seems more of a magic user than a straight up fighter, anyway. No way am I allowing to butt into what might be a true rivalry with someone who has powers I've never fought before!"

"Too late, I called dibs. Respect the sacred law of dibs." Bikou said, as his cloud lifted into the air. "Or else, I'll tell Kuroka you're only playing hard to get, and just don't want to flirt around any of the others for fear of it messing with your façade of being the cool, cold-hearted battle junkie."

Vali's skin crawled with the very idea and he was tempted to stop what he was doing to blast Bikou out of the sky. He could understand that conceptually, Kuroka all was hot, in fact, she was easily one of the most attractive women he'd ever seen or let alone talk to. She was also ever only interested in finding a strong mate and then helping to repopulate her species.

Which was fine for Kuroka. Vali had no interest whatsoever in fatherhood, or passing on his genes. In fact, if the original Lucifer line died with him, he would be fine with that. That didn't stop Kuroka from flirting with her all the time whenever they were at the Khaos Brigade's base of operations at the same time. The fact that she flirted with several of the others as well only made it even more disturbing in his eyes.

The idea of dealing with her popping up randomly when he was away from the Khaos Brigade's base didn't bear thinking about. "You wouldn't dare!"

"Try me. Respect the dibs, or else."

Snarling, Vali scowled, nodded, and, with the last word in, Bikou lifted away, laughing all the while.

About a mile away, he stopped laughing, and began to stroke his chin thoughtfully. "Now, I wonder where I can find more information about Ranma and his old man? I'll wager there's a lot of fun that could be had if I looked into his background given his reaction to me and my story about his and his father's visit to our temple."

OOOOOOO

"Rias-tan!!! I hate it when you put yourself in danger like this! I hate it, I hate it, I hate it! I also hate the fact that you seem to be making a habit of causing a lot of trouble!" Sirzechs shouted, as he appeared from out of the teleportation array that Rias is created. Before Rias could even blink, he had her up in a hug and was squeezing Rias so hard that she felt her ribs were about to burst. "Why, why, oh why, were you even here?!"

"Because I was looking into an ancient artifact of the Shinto faith. I didn't expect to run into Diodora himself although I had made allowances to check in with his clan representative. I certainly didn't expect for him to attack us not once but twice, and will you let me go?!" Rias shouted, kicking her brother in the shins, which was all she could do at present thanks to her arms being pinned to her sides by her brother's bear hug.

With a chuckle, Sirzechs did so, letting Rias land on her feet for second, whereupon she punched him in the chest. He mimed being hurt, but Rias knew that was fake, and in fact had to stop herself from wringing out her hand. *Thank goodness, he's not wearing his armor of office right now.* In fact, Sirzechs was dressed in a pair of loose sweatpants and a T-shirt with the words 'Maou do it dirty' on it, a shirt that had to have given Grayfia conniptions when she saw

it. All of which pointed to the fact that Sirzechs had been fully off the clock when Rias' familiar reached him with her message of trouble in Hakata.

Despite his earlier antics and his clothing, Sirzechs became serious a second later, gesturing down to Diodora, as well as the blood that he could see seeping through the prayer rope that was tied around him from his upper arm down to his ankles. While the wound on his upper arm had mainly cauterized and was only releasing a dribble of blood, the cut across his chest was bleeding steadily, if slowly.

"So, you said that Heir Astaroth attacked you because of Asia, and that he sent his entire peerage against you, both in a fight that he personally led, and in a fight beforehand that he tried to fob off as something random? But if that's all, a simple fight between you, that isn't something I wouldn't need to get involved in, whatever his or your motivations."

Sirzechs allowed a bit of pride to enter his voice. "You and your friends beat him, so Diodora would simply have to take his lumps and go home. Even if he lost his entire peerage, it would simply be seen as a battle between the two of you that he lost. You'd both get large slaps on the wrist in terms of a penalty for not using the Rating Game System, and you'll need to deal with a lot of scrutiny being here in Astaroth territory and defeating their heir, but that's all. So what happened that you very clearly did not include in your message to me which you wanted me involved with?"

Kneeling down, Rias turned Diodora's head, showing the Asiatic dragon tattoo, before explaining what had happened when Diodora called on it. She watched as her brother went from curious to incredibly serious in one second flat, his eyes flaring with recognition as he looked at the tattoo. Sirzechs then interrupted her tale, quickly beginning to question her about what had happened before and immediately after the dragon tattoo had appeared. He wanted to know what it looked like upon activation, what effect it had and how powerful it was.

Meanwhile, Saeko sat nearby on the grass of the temple lawn, with her lover's head in her lap, not taking part in the questioning at all. She had no idea of the dynamics of the Underworld, or what that tattoo was, so could not care less about it. Other than, of course, the fact it had allowed Diodora to give her a good fight.

The redhead was still unconscious on Saeko's lap by the time Rias and her brother turned their attention back to Diodora. The green-haired young man had woken up at some point during the long explanation of what had been going on here in Hakata and was staring at all of them with hate and fear in his eyes.

Neither Rias nor her brother had deigned to notice the priests quickly stuffing a ball of cotton into the man's mouth to keep him from shouting. Nor had either of them made any move to have Asia heal the man just yet.

Most of the fear in Diodora's face seemed to be directed at Sirzechs, which Rias fully understood. Although honestly, considering how she and Saeko were able to deal with them, she felt a little annoyed that some of that fear wasn't directed their way. *We're the ones that beat you and your whole peerage like a drum in two battles, Diodora. I would have expected better of a Rating Game Veteran.*

"Well, all that sounds incredibly fascinating, and is certainly enough to let me lock away this young man for a good long while as we question him," Sirzechs mused, staring down into Diodora's eyes. "We'll try to be gentle with you Diodora. You are after my best friend's cousin, but I think you can assume that your position as heir to the Astaroth clan is very much in doubt if that tattoo means what I know it means. Perhaps if you can give us everything you know about the Khaos Brigade, you might be able to save yourself. On the other hand, perhaps not. That depends on what you can tell us."

"Wait, what?" Rias blinked. "What does the Khaos Brigade have to do with this?"

"The Khaos Brigade is led by Ophis, The Strongest Existence, whose mark that is. Think of her as a whole other level of power above me and the other Maou," Sirzechs explained seriously. "Essentially, that tattoo creates a small connection between the wearer and Ophis, letting the user call upon a chunk of Ophis' powers. We've had reports to them before, but you've captured this user alive. I predict after we're done asking him questions, Diodora's going to find himself a guest in Ajuka's labs," Sirzechs explained.

Diodora stared back at him, torn between fear and anger in a way that he had never been before. Never, not once in his time as a spy for the Khaos Brigade, or while hiding his true personality from his parents, had he ever felt fear like this. And it was not fear of Sirzechs, or what the questioners might do to them. The devils had magic that could allow them to sift truth from lies and compel people to speak. His questioning would be relatively painless. Similarly, his position as heir to the Astaroth clan would save him from execution as a traitor or a spy of a terrorist group.

However, part of the ritual he had gone through in order to receive dragon tattoo blessing was based on his ability to keep Ophis' secrets and forward her plans in any way he could. If he could no longer keep her secrets, then the very magic that had been invested into his being via the dragon tattoo would kill him. Diodora had been told that only after he had gone through the ritual to receive the tattoo, but he hadn't really thought of it much of the time. Given how now one even in his own family suspected his real personality and the kind of missions that the Khaos Brigade asked him to do, he had never thought that being captured like this was even a remote possibility.

And now I am stuck here, in a cleft fork of my own making. I saw what I thought was a chance, luck smiling on me to bring Argento to Hakata where I could pluck her as easy as low hanging fruit. Instead, it proved to be a poisoned apple! I should have cut my losses after most

of my peerage died in my first attempt to capture her. Now, not only am I outed as a spy, but also Argento is here to witness it, here to witness my downfall!

That made it even worse in Diodora's mind. For Asia Argento, the Holy Maiden that he had thought to be able to ruin, to break to his will, to be there to see his downfall like this was a humiliation of a sort he had never felt before.

Looking in the same direction that Diodora's eyes had twitched for a second, Rias frowned pensively, then gestured Asia towards her. She put an arm around the shorter girl's shoulders, squeezing her briefly. "Asia, Diodora was the devil that you healed, which in turn caused you to be kicked out of the church right?" That had come out when Diodora, still acting like a conscientious heir with no reason to seek conflict with them, had helped to clean up the mess his peerage had caused down at the beach.

"It was. However, even if I knew the truth back then, that Diodora was a devil, I would still have healed him. That is my calling. It is why I was given my Sacred Gear in the first place. Besides," she said, a faint, but very warm smile appearing on her face, "my life could truly be said to be an example of God working in mysterious ways. If I had not been kicked out of the church, I would've never met Ranma, never would've had real friends or family to call my own."

Asia paused, staring at the three devils all of whom had twitched in pain at the mention of God, and she gasped, quickly apologizing to Rias, hugging her tightly, which Rias laughed at, hugging her back for a moment before her brother asked Asia if she could heal Diodora. With Sirzechs there, no matter what happened after he was healed, Diodora was no longer a threat to any of them.

Even as Diodora began to shout something behind his gag, Asia walked forward resolutely. Ignoring his sudden thrashing, Asia touched his shoulder gently, Twilight Healing all appearing on her fingers. A glow suffused Diodora for a moment and then he was healed.

He glared hatefully up at Asia, but Asia simply stared back at him, completely unafraid. To his shock, and growing rage, there was no hatred there either. No anger, no condemnation, even. Instead, there was simply acceptance. Something that made Asia's next words act almost like a flail across his back.

"When I kneel beside my bed for my evening prayers, I will pray for your soul. I have long since learned that devils too can be good people, and I can only wish that someday, you will turn away from sin as Rias and her friends have. Repent, and perhaps you too can find true happiness in this life."

At those words, Diodora screamed, lunging upwards, trying to headbutt or bite Asia, forgetting the gag in his mouth and trying to overcome the rope binding him. Yet even as he did, Asia turned and walked away. He shrieked at her, howling in outrage. To hear his former victim pity him, to hear her say that she would pray for him, that Asia would make his soul part of her

worship, the worship in God that he had so hope to crush within her, had Diodora just shy foaming at the mouth he was so furious.

‘I think that’s enough of that.’ Sighing, Sirzechs slapped the man across the mouth, breaking his jaw and knocking him unconscious. “Well, thank you for that Asia, and don’t worry, we have our own healers. They’ll be much slower and more painful, but he’ll have access to his jaw and teeth again before we start questioning him.”

Saeko had watched all this from where she was still sitting down with Ranma’s head in her lap, and now slowly shook her head. *I could tell that slap simply came from the man’s wrist, it had absolutely no power behind it, and he broke jump Diodora’s jaw? I knew Sirzechs and the other Maou were in a whole different category, but to see it like that is something else entirely.*

She then raised a hand to herself, lightly slapping her face. *Then again Saeko, it just goes to show you how far you have to go doesn’t it? You and Ranma alike.*

With Diodora once more unconscious, Sirzechs lifted the man up, and tossed him negatively gently through the teleportation circle. Whether he landed on his face or ass, he didn’t care. His wife would be there to make certain that nothing too painful happened to the man. With that dealt with, Sirzechs turned back to Rias. “I’ll handle informing the Astaroth clan of what happened here, but I would recommend you all move on by this time tomorrow. Oh, before I forget...”

Sirzechs held out a small card, which had his signature, both physical and magical on it. “You asked me to look into getting you all permission to go to Kyoto a while back. You will need to call ahead, set up dates and times and so forth, but this pass will allow you to go there despite, well, the Youkai Association not really getting along with us devils very much right now.”

Rias nodded, taking the card with all the seriousness it demanded, even if the reason why she had wanted to go to Kyoto wasn’t all that serious at all.

The Youkai Association was the governing body of supernatural creatures in Asia, as well as having quite a few representatives from elsewhere in the world. This included fox kin, oni, ghosts, European minotaurs, a few hydra and other things of that nature. These, or at least the homegrown variety, were the supernatural enemies that the Shinra and Himejima clans had been trained to fight against for centuries before the Three Factions began to make inroads into Japan.

The Youkai Association was not at all happy, as Sirzechs had said, with the Underworld and hadn’t been for nearly seven years now. The reason why simple: the Nekomata Massacre. After Kuroka had turned on her peerage’s king, for reasons that most still didn’t know about, devils all over the Underworld had reacted poorly, both due to hate with a healthy livening of fear because of the fact that due to her nekomata heritage, Kuroka had somehow come within

spitting distance of a Maou despite being a 'mere' nekomata, or rather, nekoshu. Hundreds of nekomata across the Underworld had been killed, and the Youkai Association had cut all but the frostiest diplomatic connection with the devils and the rest of the Three Factions than they could keep.

The Youkai Association was also situated in and around Kyoto, hence the need for a pass. Rias wasn't certain why, but she figured that there was some historical reason for it. Or perhaps a magical one? The youkai, unlike angels and devils, had naturally evolved on Earth and thus were far more connected to the natural magic of the world, which Kuroka had shown with her Senjutsu.

Regardless, Kyoto was also a mecca for Japanophiles like Rias, which was why she wanted to go. The libraries and the histories kept there might have more clues on other weapons like Shinrai no Ha or other things of that nature which would be amazing. And, well, going there and exploring would be a lot more fun than just using the internet again.

"However, the Youkai Association had a requirement for that pass," Sirzechs warned. "They demand you bring Koneko along with you when you go. Whenever is fine so long as you call ahead, but Koneko has to be with you."

Rias blinked at that, brows furrowing. "This, this has something to do with ki or chakra and Senjutsu, I suppose? Or does Koneko have some distant family members that are still living there?"

"It might. As for family, I doubt it," Sirzechs admitted, looking pained. He knew the real reason why Kuroka had turned on her former king and had been the one who let Kuroka escape afterward. He had even introduced Koneko to Rias, helping both girls. He hadn't been able to stop the Nekomata Massacre in time and always felt guilty about it whenever Koneko or her estranged sister came up in conversation. "But I doubt whatever it is will be harmful to Koneko. The Youkai Association might hate devilkin, but she's one of them."

While this conversation was going on, Asia had returned to sit on the steps leading up to the temple. Given the damages done to the temple itself in the battle, the head priest had decided no one was going to be entering the building until it was repaired. Something that Asia knew Ranma-nii would be able to do easily enough once he woke up and there was enough light to see by. The second issue was almost as big as the first, since the sun had started to set while Sirzechs and Rias were talking.

While they were waiting, for Sirzechs, Asia had decided to ask further questions about the Shinto-style magic. The priests had agreed to create a primer of sorts for her to start learning their style of kotodama-based magic. Not many, but Asia did have a magical core thanks to Twilight Healing, and thus would be able to power some of the Sitri Clan talismans. Those spells would be quite limited, as Linfai wasn't willing to share his clan's more powerful spells with outsiders, but would still help Asia defend herself.

Rika and Shizuka had been listening to this for a while, with Shizuka dressed in a spare priest's robe over her swimsuit. The outfit, taken from a particularly fat example of the priesthood that none of the current temple's inhabitants could fit in, hung off her loosely, but still looked somehow absurdly sexy in how much of her cleavage it showed as well as the hints of lower leg. Yet it was better than her swimsuit, at least.

As Asia rejoined them, Shizuka leaned forward. "By the way, um, we won't be in trouble for finding Shinrai no Ha and retrieving it, will we? Only, the exit we took to get out of that underground hallway led to right here, and Shinrai no Ha is the sword of Raijin, a Shinto god. So shouldn't you all, as the resident priests--"

"No," Linfai stated firmly. "If it belonged to the temple or we had any claim to it, one of my clan's younger folk would have been able to discover and retrieve the blade at some point in the past hundred years. That even we of the Shinra Clan failed in this means that Shinrai no Ha is not ours, but rather was simply in our area of purview."

He looked over to where Saeko sat. Seeing she had turned to regard them, Linfai smiled. "If the blade has deemed you worthy of wielding it child, then that is enough for me." Linfai's face firmed. "However, I must insist that you stay here with us tonight to describe how Shinrai no Ha was protected."

He frowned then, staring out past the temple's environs and out into the city beyond. The area of the city directly around his temple was mostly residential in nature, but beyond that skyscrapers rose, a visible sign of modernity, a symbol for what he had to be wary of right now. "I am also deeply concerned about the possibility of this underground area no lingering remaining hidden now that the source of the magic hiding it has been taken. We will need to think of ways to either hide it again with our own, limited magic, or ask the devils for further aid in that department."

And since we helped fight the heir of the Astaroth clan, that is going to be tricky, Linfai mused sardonically. No matter if the boy was a criminal, the clan might take that poorly.

Hearing his concerns, Saeko nodded reluctantly. *Drat, I hoped to perhaps talk Ranma into continuing what his Neko-Ken side very obviously wanted to do without an audience this time... well except for Rias, possibly.* Nevertheless, understanding why the locals wanted to know everything they could about the hidden chamber and the tunnels connecting it to the surface, Saeko knew they had a point.

"Ooh, oooh, I'll stay too!" Shizuka explained, bouncing lightly in place, and it was all the priests could do to not stare or fall into prayer to cleanse their thoughts of worldly lust. "I was able to examine a lot more than Saeko was able to when she was getting zapped by Shinrai no Ha. And..." the blonde became serious for a moment. "I definitely think the murals and the images on the walls down there need to be copied. All of it is far too important to let anything happen to it, regardless of what you all decide to do with the original area."

Rias moved over to join the others, her brother disappearing into the teleportation array behind her, the portal popping out of existence a moment later. "Well, that's him taken care of. My brother will handle the Astaroth clan, with everything that happened here with the dragon tattoo and my brother having brought along a truth crystal to make certain that I was telling the truth about Diodora being the one to start everything, we shouldn't have any trouble going forward. Would've liked it if he'd freaking mentioned it to me before popping into the portal like a..."

"Like a martial artist skipping out on the bill at a restaurant?" Mousse quipped, shivering a little, his eyes wide at the idea of a truth crystal despite his seeming humor at the idea. *I'm very thankful I didn't know such a thing was anywhere near us! That kind of thing would be extremely dangerous in the wrong circumstances.*

"Hah, that works," Rias chuckled, before looking at the priests and then around at the temple, putting Linfai's earlier worries about the Astaroth clan's reaction to events into words when she went on. "However, I'm not certain that will be the case for you, Linfai or your temple. When it comes out that you helped us against Diodora, the Astaroth Clan might feel that that repudiates the agreement you made with them. In that case, it will come down to whether or not they think continuing the deal they made with you is more important than saving face or punishing you, regardless of Diodora's own actions."

"What will happen, will happen. I am more concerned about, as Miss Shizuka just pointed out, making certain that anything with historical value or religious significance is at the very least copied if not removed from the underground grotto where Shinrai no Ha was hidden," Linfai stated firmly.

"That is actually a very good point." Rias muttered as she shook her head. "Now I wish I had asked my brother for help on that score too. Tell you what, I will head down to the ocean now, and if I can see the small torii gate that marks the entrance there, I'll do what I can to make certain that the locals are taking notice of it. Hopefully the magical enchantments there haven't collapsed quite yet despite you removing the battery so to speak," she added teasingly, winking over at Saeko.

Saeko smiled back, amused somewhat at how flirty Rias could make that simple movement. "How long do you think that will take?"

"No idea. However, I think it will certainly take long enough that it will be dinnertime by the time I'm done. Go down and investigate myself if the defenses blocking me from seeing what's there is gone. After that, I think I'll head straight back to the hotel."

She looked over at Mousse, who was looking morosely down at some of the daggers he had used during the battle. All of whom had been badly melted. Rika was also looking over a few of them, talking quietly to the weapons user about something that had just occurred to her, which Rias had missed.

She didn't miss Mousse's reaction though, which was to look at the policewoman, snort, then rolled his eyes. "I'm not going to be your pack mule, no offense Rika-san. I agree that my weapon space could hide a lot of goodies, and I'd be very interested what kind of advanced goodies you could get your hands on for me, but access to such is only going to get you at best a tenth of my carrying capacity."

"A tenth specifically for me, and a fifth for stuff that we can both use? I've got ideas..." Rika said, trailing off and rubbing her hands, looking for all the world like she was trying to pull off the evil witch look and failing miserably. Mainly because of the busty blonde woman who was currently snuggled into her side.

"Plan acts of great violence and wanton destruction later. If I'm heading out, you all will need to carry Ranma. I don't understand why he's out of it," Rias said, looking over at the shorter redhead worriedly.

"I have very limited ki sense, but I can tell he was pretty drained," Mousse said, shrugging his shoulders. "Whatever he was doing before he got stuck in the Neko-Ken took it out of him a lot. I don't know what that was though, so don't ask for more detail. He's simply sleeping it off right now, that's all."

Saeko looked relieved, having felt a little guilty about the lightning effect that had apparently caused Ranma's currently unconscious state, whereas Rias simply shrugged. "That makes sense. Do you all think you can get him back to the hotel without well-being stopped by the police because you're carrying an unconscious woman? Or should I transport him there myself?"

"Actually, I'm not going to go back straight to the hotel, so it would be just Mousse and Asia," Rika said, while Shizuka yawned mightily at her side. It had been past midday when Diodora and his periods had arrived, and it was now past sunset on a rather long, hard day.

Looking quite put out that she would be staying at the temple, Saeko sighed, and finally pushed Ranma's head off her lap, standing up, deliberately not noticing how the two young priests looked away. While Saeko certainly didn't look like a fertility goddess made flesh like Shizuka did, and was currently wearing a shirt donated by Mousse, she was still in her swimsuit underneath that, which put her legs on glorious display. This was made worse by the fact that the shirt was an undershirt, a muscle T-shirt to be precise, and it clung to her skin almost like a second swimsuit, covering everything but further accentuating her curves.

"Well, I am quite hungry. I don't suppose the kitchen is accessible?" she asked looking over at the priests now as she finished stretching. "If you think you can start questioning me and Shizuka about what we discovered down there without feeding us first, you have another thing coming."

“In that case, I’ll drop Ranma off at the hotel. Mousse, Asia, start heading back that way now. Wait, do you think you can find your way back?” Rias asked, reminded suddenly that she had been the one who had led them to the temple and that this was a strange city to most of them.

The head priest spoke up at that point, offering to call a taxi, which Asia and Mousse both gratefully accepted, with Rias handing over her credit card to pay for it. Soon, everyone is going their separate way, with Rias promising that she and Ranma would be back at the temple first thing in the morning to meet up with Saeko again and handle the repairs. Then Rias was in the air, heading toward the beach and the ocean beyond.

OOOOOOO

At the same time that Rias was flying towards the ocean, Gabriel was arriving at Jusenkyo along with her two companions/minders. The second feeling was much more prevalent at times over this journey than either Irina and Xenovia would have thought back in Rome, but it had somewhat lessened as their journey had continued, first to Japan, then to here in these remote islands. Even now, though, they still occasionally needed to pull Gabriel away from a specific view or park. They had also learned rapidly to keep her away from art galleries or museums of any kind.

Before arriving at Jusenkyo, the trio had stopped in to speak to the local Amazon tribe for half a day. With all three of them being women, and Xenovia being more than willing to prove that they were warriors, the Joketsuzoku had accepted them quite easily. Their faith had not been, but then again, none of the three had made that big point of it.

Before this journey, the two exorcists would have, but Irina and Xenovia were still dealing with the ramifications of what they had learned from Kokabiel’s manic self-aggrandizement during the invasion of Kuoh: that God, the Holy Father was dead, and Michael had simply stepped into his position up in heaven. They hadn’t really come to a conclusion yet about what to feel about that, and probably wouldn’t for some time yet, but it had certainly made them more circumspect about browbeating other people because of it.

Of course, Gabriel caused some waves simply by being Gabriel. Even with her Archangel form sealed again, good looks, strength and kindness had gathered many of the Joketsuzoku to her. To the point where, by the time they had left, Gabriel had a small fan club among them, something that had both of the exorcists giggling a little, particularly when it rapidly became clear that Gabriel had no idea that she was so popular and why.

With the Joketsuzoku falling all over one another to be helpful, even the elders after Gabriel had sparred with one of them, the trio from the church had learned a good deal from the Joketsuzoku about Jusenkyo. Now, as they stood beside the guide outside of his small cottage, the trio were very pointedly staying well away from the edge of the nearest pools as they stared at the expanse of the valley that held the cursed springs.

"Is it just me, or is there way more fog out there than there should be? I mean it's a hot day, the sun is high in the sky and there's fog. I don't know much about the weather, but I know that's not right," Irina murmured, frowning pensively.

"It's as if the valley itself doesn't want us to see the end of it, or as if the end is in flux, maybe?" Xenovia hands cupped above her eyes, as she too stared at the distant fog. "But it's not just in the distance either but wafting off some of the pools to the point where bits of the ground between them are barely visible. I think both of those are a sign this whole place is one big curse, one big trap as the Amazons told us."

"Aiyaah, guests hit on one of most interesting secrets of Jusenkyo yes? Most people, they come to springs, they no see end of valley," the guide said, waving a hand dramatically towards the horizon and seemingly ignoring the fact, his latest guests had gotten some information from the warrior women before this. "To most, even guide, there be no end to valley. Go in search, get lost in fog, fall in spring, come back here. Never find the end."

"Even if you're trying to map it from the sky?" Gabriel asked, wondering perhaps if she should do that very thing, as the Joketsuzoku hadn't mentioned the idea. Even from here, though, she could feel the chaos magic roiling office battlefield, and yet, at the same time, Gabriel could still see a few landmarks she remembered. Millennia had passed since she had previously stood here, since Gabriel and Michael had led the retreat after God's death at the hands of Kokabiel, the hyena having attacked God when he was at his weakest, after sealing the great beast away. Yet some memories were too powerful to ever fade.

Despite that, those memories held no visceral reaction for Gabriel any longer. Having been part of finally getting justice for Father, Gabriel had moved past the sadness and grief that thinking of that last battle had always evoked in her. She still felt sadness of course, but it was nowhere near as powerful.

"There be legend of Phoenix tribe, half bird, half person tribe being able to map the valley. But map changes over time. Part of the magic of the Jusenkyo be that of Chaos, yes? Chaos not quantifiable," the guide opined.

Irina frowned a little, turning to look at the guide. He was a very... roly-poly man, although Irina didn't really like to think disparagingly of people simply for the way they looked. Yet in this case, it was certainly the truth. He was somewhat overweight and moved ponderously but showed a certain amount of dexterity and surefootedness when he had led them up here from the entrance into the valley below. He was also bald, wore an old communist soldier's outfit, complete with hat, and a face that looked as if you could make a very good impersonation of it with a thumb and a few lines from a pen.

However, his appearance was not nearly the strangest thing about him, which Irina addressed now. "We're all speaking Chinese. Our translation magic is easily up to letting us

understand full sentences and sentence structure of any language. Why do you sound to us as if you're speaking pidgin Chinese, when you are, in fact, Chinese?"

"Hahaha, customer hit on a second great mystery of Jusenkyo! No guide know why, but after two year of serving, all guide sound like this to outsider, regardless of language. It big, **big** curse. Sometimes cause trouble when people think we idiot, and even once breakup marriage when wife not happy with husband talk normal any longer," the guide said, bowing his head morosely at the memory of that.

Irina and Xenovia didn't get the impression that it had been his marriage, which had collapsed, but he seemed to know the man whose marriage had, while Gabriel simply gave the man hit her condolences, before concentrating on her magical senses for a moment. Doing so, Gabriel opened her senses not just to the ambient magic around her, but to the spiritual side of things, which, if as she put it to her companions earlier that day, would be somewhat like switching from simply listening to the AM radio to the FM. While they were both radio signals, they were at different wavelengths from one another, if still able to be discerned in a limited fashion by those with magical senses.

And here, those signals definitely cross, she thought, as significant portions of the valley ahead of her seemingly shifted to her eyes. No longer was she seeing just the physical plane, but rather, the mental one. And it was a mess, to put it mildly. Gabriel had known that heading in. There was a reason why the Jusenkyo were off limits to all those from the church, the fallen and even devil kind. The Jusenkyo and the Chaos magic here were just immensely powerful and tangled.

Beyond that, was the spiritual side of things, which itself fed into the chaos magic. Gabriel had hoped that this aspect had settled down. That with effort and the right enchantments, the Church might be able to recover at least the weapons of the angels who had fallen in battle here, or maybe even commune with some of the spirits. Within a few seconds, Gabriel knew that wasn't going to happen.

Gabriel first began to discern the souls left behind in the water of the beings who had died there to give the pool its specific curse. A cat here, a panda there, her eyes drawn to those two animals because of her to discussions with Ranma back in Japan. Beyond them, there were even stranger animals. A monkey carrying what looked like a meal of some kind, a penitent monk from the Middle Ages. A large flying snake, a beast from India's youkai population. An elephant, who had apparently drowned in a spring that was far too small for that to be possible at the moment, the sight of which made Gabriel wonder if the springs could grow or shrink as well as shift position and create fog to confuse the senses of their victims.

And beyond them, beyond them were the spirits of the beings whose death had created the Jusenkyo in the first place. Not many. Unlike the souls of the creatures in the pool, the souls of the dead from that ancient battle had been mainly subsumed, their magical power and their souls adding to the chaotic magic that hung like a permanent miasma on this place. Angels and

devils, archangels and fiends as well as numerous fallen were there, not locked in battle, but simply there. Their faces and forms appeared out of the background roil of chaos magic, their very magical essence bound together one to another and then into the territory of the Jusenkyo, onto the battlefield where God fell.

Only a few of those spirits seemed self-aware, seemed to emulate in spiritual form the bodies they had in life. Even among the supernatural, be it the hosts of heaven or the legions of hell and the fallen, it took a massive amount of willpower and self-knowledge to be able to retain their forms after death. Yet there were still several dozen with such willpower, such had been the size and climactic nature of the battle.

In the distance a massive demonic figure rose, one that Gabriel was all too familiar with, Beelzebub, the Lord of Flies. Nearby, an Archangel flew, the two spirits glaring at one another even now, millennia after they had both received mortal wounds from the other. There, Ananiel, Angel of Water, one of Gabriel's oldest and dearest friends, stood, seemingly wagging a finger at two fallen angels, whose features were indiscernible at this angle. She looked up as if she sensed Gabriel in turn, and waved, causing Gabriel to wave back, a smile on her face that confused both the guide and the exorcists by her side.

And there, right in the middle of the battlefield, there stood Lucifer, the Fallen Star, as perfect and as glorious in death as he had been in his creation and then his fall from heaven. He stared back at Gabriel and gave her a smirk. It was beautiful that smirk, beautiful yet flawed, wrong, yet enticing, drawing in both attention and confidence of those who saw it.

Or so others might have discerned it. To Gabriel, Lucifer's charisma, his physical presence, none of it had any appeal to the Archangel of the Message. She simply cocked her head thoughtfully to one side, then turned her attention away from the original fallen angel. Doing so caused Lucifer to snarl for a second, but he too looked away and soon both of them were looking in the same direction.

Gabriel kept looking through the battlefield, hoping to find something, she wasn't certain what really but something. Whatever it was however, there was no obvious sign of it, and then, she sensed it, sensed something in the distance, something underpinning everything else here, an underlying echo of power, might and determination. A faint echo of divinity clinging to one specific spot in the distance of the valley.

Gabriel was crying. She didn't know why, but staring at that spot of the battlefield, it evoked such powerful emotions within her, regret, grief, guilt, sadness, pride, defiance, joy, all of it a model, all of it as chaotic as the magic around the Jusenkyo.

The feeling of someone shaking her arm brought Gabriel back to the here and now, and she stumbled, still dealing with the overwhelming emotions that had been pulled from her for a moment. Irina caught her, keeping the taller woman upright with difficulty until Xenovia joined in, the bluenette staring at Gabriel in worry. "Lady Gabriel, are you all right?"

"I, I am physically well. I did not discover what I had hoped, alas. But what I did find... I will need to report this to Michael. Perhaps he or someone else in Heaven will know what to do with the information. I do not," Gabriel admitted, before smiling at both of the exorcists, and pushing to her feet again. "Indeed, I am still sifting through what I have discovered here."

"But, but is it, is this really..." Xenovia began.

"Yes," Gabriel said simply. "I can still feel it easily. I can feel a great deal of things here, above and beyond the background magic, but yes. This is truly the site of the last battle of the war between heaven and hell. It is where Father fell."

So confused by the imagery she had seen, other than of course Lucifer and his attempts to beguile her, which was about as obvious as rainfall and just about as important as such would be to asphalt to Gabriel, Gabriel took a step forward, then looked over at the guide, remembering what he had said earlier. "You were saying something about this place not being even able to be mapped from the sky correct?"

"Jusenkyo not like be mapped. If enough eyes, wait until those eyes shift away. If one person, shift even as you watch," the guide warned. "Also target you if try."

Gabriel frowned. "I don't want us to get separated, and I don't think there's any real need for us to try to map the entire valley if I can't do it from the air. However, I do want to head in a little deeper. I should be safe from any curses so long as I'm in the air. Did the two of you bring along those long handled... what were they called again?"

"There is a specific term for them, but I can't remember, either. Not that it matters, they're just long sticks in a way," Irina chuckled. Reaching into her large backpack, she pulled out several metal bars. Sticking them together one after another, Irina soon had a pole arm that was about twice as tall as she was, with the end of it having a small claw device. Into that claw device she put a beaker, which Irina could use to take samples of the cursed pools.

It had been decided early on to not try to use Excalibur Mimic to grab a sample of the cursed water. No one wanted to see if the Chaos Magic of the territory somehow affected the weapon, or worse, could simply copy the Excalibur fragment. That would be very troublesome indeed.

"You two stay here. Xenovia, keep your eyes on both Irina and me. I won't go far, just up into the air to one side. I want to see if I really can discern an end to the area impacted by the curse," Gabriel requested.

However, Jusenkyo was not about to let their plans go unanswered. It wasn't just the ground and the water in the valley that was impacted by the background magic of this place. The Chaos Magic here wasn't intelligent; it didn't create plans or act in a thinking manner. Yet at the same time, everything in the valley was impacted by a specific imperative: if someone

entered the valley, they were cursed. Plain and simple. Age, race, nothing else mattered. Only the most skilled visitors, like the elders of the Joketsuzoku or the kings of the Musk could claim to be able to enter the valley and escape. Even the Phoenix Tribe could not do so with impunity, unless they remained well, well above the ground, far enough away that making out any details was nearly impossible

Yet Gabriel was a highly skilled combatant. Even as she flew from one side of the entrance into the valley to the other, she saw birds flying toward her. One, a particularly large crow, dove down toward her head with such force that Gabriel blinked as another one hit one of her wings. She corrected easily and then began to dance in among the birds humming thoughtfully. "Well, I cannot say if there is a fell intelligence behind this, but I can definitely sense a malicious intent here."

She didn't lash out against the crows and other birds. It wasn't necessary. Even in numbers like this, none of them were a threat to her. And when fog began to grow in from the edges of the valley, Gabriel retreated, unwilling to fly into the fog.

If she had been on her own, perhaps Gabriel might have gotten away without being cursed. In the air, Jusenkya's curse could do precious little. Yet she wasn't. There were two other victims still on the ground.

"Well, I think we've just proven that science can conquer Chaos Magic at least a little bit," Irina crowed, as she pulled the device back towards her slowly.

"Maybe, but I won't be satisfied until we are well away from here. I think-- Irina look out!" Xenovia shouted suddenly seeing the ground giving way underneath Irina.

A fissure had opened up suddenly, starting from one of the nearby springs and surging towards Irina's current position, filling with water quickly.

Even with her friends warning, Irina was only able to jump straight up, not to either side, and she stared down at where the water suddenly surged into the crevice that had opened, her eyes wide. "That's not even subtle, you---" she shouted, raging at Jusenkya with a fist in the air even as she fell into the water, while the pole she had been carrying flew straight up.

Xenovia charged forwards, intent on helping her friend, but paused, then backed away rapidly, only for the ground to similarly give out underneath her too. She leaped away in time, however, landing on top of the guide's hut, then rolling off to one side, well away from the springs and in the safe zone at the entrance into the valley. Xenovia had gotten away.

However, Gabriel would not. She would instead prove that, inside the valley, the curse could affect even things brought in from the outside, at least to the point of controlling the probability of certain outcomes. Because Gabriel was busy dodging birds and coming in for a

landing, she didn't see Irina's pole whirling in the air, nor did she see the water cascading out of the small tube at the end.

Gabriel certainly felt the water hit her from above, though. "What in His name..." Gabriel began, before she began to change. An instant later, she was falling, but such was Gabriel's martial skill she was able to still control her fall, landing not in a heap but feet first, rolling forward to kill her momentum as she did.

"Aiyaah, I never see the Jusenkyo take such active action before! The pools, they really not like being probed," the guide said, his tone oscillating between shocked but helpful, and ecstatic, making Gabriel, as she pushed herself to her feet, wonder if perhaps the Jusenkyo had more of an impact on the people than simply changing how they communicated with other people.

"Is the curse permanent even if you don't actually fall into one of the springs? You can be cursed just by a vial of the substance?" Gabriel asked.

Xenovia, coming around the corner of the hut, blinked. That had been Gabriel's voice, but it wasn't as vibrant, powerful or compelling as normal. That was strange, but what she saw as she rounded the corner a second later was even stranger.

Gabriel's wings were gone. Her golden hair looked simply blonde now. Her curves were there too, but somehow not as unnaturally perky. She was still beautiful, so beautiful she put models to shame, yet that extra something that had always been there around Gabriel was gone. She seemed just... a normal woman.

"It is so, honored guest. Magic in water, not the springs," the guide stated.

Just then, a small animal pulled itself out of the spring Irina had been forcibly introduced to. A small fox, or so it seemed, until the fox sneezed, and a burst of smoke exploded off her. The next second, Irina was revealed, naked, as her clothing had fallen off her in the water when she had been transformed into a fox. She screamed, and Xenovia instantly turned and planted a foot into the guide's face, knocking him out and preserving her friend's modesty.

Yet Irina's nakedness wasn't the most surprising thing. No, that was owed to the large, foxlike ears that were currently clamped to the sides of her skull, and the large foxtail that was helping Irina cover herself up at present.

Gabriel could not have stopped herself if she had tried, and Gabriel's impulse control when it came to cute things wasn't the best. Moving forward, she laid a hand on Irina's head, rubbing her ears. "Oooh, you look so cute, Irina! Does this feel good, I've always wondered what an animal being petted feels."

"MRrhhh... Gabriel-sama, don'.... Oooh that does feel good," Irina mumbled, "but um, could I have some clothing, please?" Irina then blinked, staring at Gabriel. "Gabriel-sama, are you!?"

Laughing Gabriel explained what had happened taking a step back and looking down at her body for a moment. "I would assume that water came from the spring of drowned girl. Thus, the only thing that changed is I became a real human. This is amazing. I wonder what Michael will think about it?" she mused, before stepping back to let Xenovia hand Irina her clothing. "For right now, though, perhaps some hot water is in order?"

OOOOOOO

"I'm back," Rias announced as she opened the door leading out onto the balcony of one of the hotel rooms that they had rented out for their time in Hakata.

"Welcome back, did you run into any serious complications? You weren't gone for very long. Asia and I ordered some room service and it hasn't even had time to arrive yet. In fact, Asia is still in the shower in our room," Mousse said, looking up from where he had been looking at a strange series of diagrams. What they were, Rias didn't know, but she didn't ask, either.

"Thankfully, the magic hiding the entryway still seems to be holding for now. Judging from what I was sensing, I don't think it will hold for very long but the priests and I will probably have a day or two to work out something more permanent to continue to hide the entrance into the labyrinth," Rias said, looking towards the door as it opened and Asia entered, looking as if she had just had a shower.

Rias smiled at the girl and gestured her to sit at the table. "Come on, if the food isn't here yet, I have time to do your hair before it arrives. I'll put off my own shower too until after we eat."

"Actually, I can do her hair if you want to hop in the shower quick," Mousse volunteered surprising both of the other girls. He blinked at their surprise, then with a chuckle, gestured to his long hair. "What, did you think I grew my hair long just to fit in with the Joketsuzoku? I actually like doing hair stuff." That might have started as a way to get close to Shampoo when they were younger, but it had segued into an actual hobby.

Asia blushed for some reason, but Rias, with a small smirk, agreed, and even as Asia waved her hands and protested, headed into the shower.

Ranma was still unconscious on one of the beds when she came back out, and, while Asia's blush slowly disappeared, the shorter redhead remained out of it as their food arrived and they put it on the table. However, the moment they removed the covers from the various plates and the smell of the food began to waft around them, a loud roar caused all of them to

twitch, with Asia nearly twitching so hard she fell out of her seat, staring at where the noise had come from.

"I think he's hungry." Mousse chuckled, shaking his head.

The next second, Ranma sat up, reminding Rias of watching a wrestler from America and how he did it, going from dead to alive in one second flat with just stomach muscles. Then the shorter redhead was across the room, grabbing at the food. Rias didn't let her though, smacking her hand away from the food with a spoon. "Explanation first Ranma, then food. You were in the Neko-Ken when you found us, and you've been out for at least two to three hours by this point."

Frowning (pouting) a little, Ranma mocked holding her hand against her chest as if that had actually hurt before she nodded, her lips twitching up into a smirk. "You member that Violet guy?"

"Violet?"

"Er, no, that wasn't it, Vali, I think? The guy who tried to claim that Kokabiel was a fallen internal matter that the Grigori needed to deal with? He showed up here, looking for a fight. I obliged. I wasn't winning, but I think I was holding my own until he basically decided to just stay in the air and start spamming magical attacks down at me," Ranma grumbled, shaking her head. Ranma knew she hadn't been really winning that fight, but she had been giving as good as he (at the time) got when the fight was on the ground or in the trees and she knew that at least in hand-to-hand in terms of skill, she'd had Vali beat.

Bastard was definitely out-endurancing me, though. Took my best shots and I couldn't do any real damage. Still, at least I've got a goal now. But... weird? What happened to put me out for so long? I... I remember Sae-chan and then... like I stepped on a live wire. Weird.

"What?" Rias stated blankly. "I'm going to need a lot more than that Ranma."

What followed wasn't exactly chosen to make her happy either. After Ranma had given a longer explanation of the fight, Rias began to rub at her temple, while Mousse's eyes had narrowed at the mention of his love. "He just showed up, asked for a fight and you agreed? You didn't even question why he was in devil clan's territory to do it? And you fought without a dimensional bubble?!"

Growling, Rias opened her phone quickly looking for any online uproar or similar about possibly real supernatural sightings. To her surprise, she didn't find any.

"No, not really," Ranma laughed, reaching out and taking a bowl, beginning to fill it up with some rice and vegetables. "Vali wanted a fight, and I figured that whoever was behind the attack on Mousse and Saeko would be smart enough to wait until we all weren't on edge to pick

a fight with you all. Vali also didn't seem to be the type to take no for an answer when it came to a fight. I just wish the fight didn't end the way it did."

Dumping a cup of hot water over her head, Ranma smirked. "I'm not sorry I stole that other guy's staff for so long, though. Douchy little monkey man deserved it for frightening me about whether or not there was some kind of agreement between his temple and my father like that."

While Rias stared at her phone, trying to make sense of what she wasn't seeing, Mousse spoke up. He had been mainly silent throughout this retelling, only flinching when Shampoo became involved, with Ranma not elaborating about how or what happened after that, but connecting the dots was easy enough. "What happened with Shampoo? And how were you pushed into the Neko-Ken with only her around? Did... did Shampoo do that deliberately for some reason? I would've thought she would've learned by now."

Asia noted how annoyed and bitter Mousse sounded when he spoke, and reached under the table to grasp his hand, squeezing it gently. He blinked, but calmed down, and squeezed her hand back.

With a sigh, Ranma shook his head. "Now, that, that I'm not so happy about. I... I kinda blew up at her. I think most of what I said needed to be said, and a lot of it was stuff I'd already told her a few times, but how I went about it... ya know I don't really like hurting girls' feelings. But..."

From there, Ranma elaborated on the blowup between him and Shampoo, and then what had happened after: specifically, how his ki claws had seemingly, from what little Ranma could recall, forced Vali and his companion to retreat, and how Shampoo had deliberately pushed him into the Neko-Ken.

Mousse frowned pensively through this, his face twitching through a variety of emotions, and by the time Ranma was done, he was finished eating his first three bowls. "Shampoo will no doubt be down in the dumps because of what you said to her, but unfortunately, I think that the longer she is on her own the more it will be easy enough for Shampoo to convince herself that you didn't really mean any of that. Or, as she said to you several times, that your opinions don't really matter because you're a man."

"I'm trying hard to think of which of those statements bother me more, and have decided they both bother me a shit ton," Ranma grumbled. "As much as I don't like how I basically shouted at her, I still don't want to deal with Shampoo again. You know Granny's phone number? Maybe ya could get her here to take care of Shampoo?"

"I do, but that will take a day at least. I know Shampoo's hunting methods, how she'll live off the land here. I think I can find her and at least convince her not to make more trouble here in Hakata. Given all that's happened, and that Sirzechs told us to be on our best behavior

from now on, I think that might be best,” Mousse said, pushing himself to his feet with manifest reluctance, causing Ranma to blink not having heard about what had happened to the others yet, although his memories of seeing Saeko and the others while in Neko-ken had kept him from worrying about Saeko’s absence.

Oddly, that was a sign of the very limited training Ranma had been able to do with Koneko so far when it came to beating his cat-induced madness. While he still had no control while gripped by the Neko-Ken, he had, oddly, begun to remember bits and pieces of what he got up to while in that state. It was never very clear, and way more about emotions than anything specific, but that was still progress in Ranma’s voice, even if it wasn’t in the direction he had hoped for.

Mousse smiled very briefly at Ranma, his emotions still awirl. While Ranma was sad about how he’d put a lot of what he’d said to Shampoo Mousse could tell that she had been even more at fault for the argument, and not just by being there at all. Indeed, some of the words shouted by Shampoo had sounded mean and self-serving, as well as so matriarchal it was horrifying. “Even if I can do that though, I can’t promise she won’t make trouble elsewhere.”

“Tell me Cologne’s phone number, and I’ll call her up and inform her of what’s been going on here with Shampoo. Since it wasn’t an attack on me or any other devil, I won’t push too much, but I will make it very clear that making trouble like this when we’re traveling, especially when we’re in another devil clan’s territory is not a good idea.”

“I’ll talk to Granny too about it,” Ranma volunteered. “She might not care overmuch about making trouble for local devils, but Shampoo could have been killed when she butted into my fight with Vali. If Vali himself wasn’t such a good sport about it, anyway. She’s good, heck Shampoo developed this nifty little trick with her weapon space and messing with the momentum of things she shoots out of it but she was still in major danger.”

“Major danger, is that anything like stranger danger?” Rias snorted, only to watch as Ranma held up a sign with 1/10 written on it, while Mousse held up a 2/10, and Asia simply shook her head sighing sadly. “Never mind, I thought it was funny considering how strange you Jusenkyo folk are. You all are so mean!”

Chuckling, Mousse headed for the door. As he left, he heard Ranma ask, “So, what did you all get up to today? And why the heck do I have a vague memory of that Dio guy at your feet, Rias-chan? And where’s Sae-chan?”

Like Ranma, Shampoo, Mousse and several of the others had developed some methods to help them to live off the road or to blend in with the locals to a certain degree, which allowed them to go unbothered by local authorities and to make some money. Or at least get their hands on some food, which, for most martial artists, was more important. Mousse knew Shampoo’s methods, indeed, he shared some of them, and he began to traverse the city, paying attention to the various Chinese food shops.

Eventually, looking through a window, he spotted Shampoo back in her female body, working as a waitress. Shampoo didn't spot him in turn, and Mousse moved over to a nearby rooftop, where he could see both down into the alleyway behind the restaurant and the entryway there as well as the front of the restaurant just in case.

He had to wait another hour before the restaurant began to close down and Shampoo left by the back entrance, within a few minutes she had taken to the rooftops. Mousse followed without being seen and as she landed on a third rooftop, he called out, "Shampoo," getting her to stop.

Turning in the direction of Mousse's voice, Shampoo sighed, shaking her head, the gesture so dismissive that Mousse flinched. "I'm in no mood to deal with you right now Mousse. My Airen and I had a fight, and it wasn't a fun one either," she said in Putonghua.

"I know, Ranma told me. What were you thinking, barging into a fight like that? You should know by now that when it comes to the supernatural world, you, me, even Ranma to a certain extent are very much near the bottom of things. This Vali fellow was literally calling down bolts of raw magic and destruction from a range that even Ranma couldn't deal with," Mousse said.

Shampoo flared up, tossing aside her tiredness and glaring at Mousse. "Shut up stupid Mousse! I thought I could get at the drop on him, or at least fight alongside Airen. Besides, this doesn't have anything to do with you."

Mousse flinched a bit at the cold acerbic tone in Shampoo's voice, then scowled a little shaking his head. "You thought you could get the drop on him? Someone who can fly, who can fight on Ranma's level, or beyond? You're not that foolish, Shampoo! Or at least I didn't think you were?"

"Shut up! You sound as if you think you could've done better. But I am a Joketsuzoku, remember that," Shampoo growled. She made to lift up her chui, but she had lost them both in her brief fight with Ranma. Instead, she took an unarmed stance. "What are you doing here, anyway?"

"Protecting Healer Asia," Mousse said, shrugging. "I won't lie and say that Ranma and I have always had a good relationship or anything like that, that would be impossible, but protecting a healer is an honorable goal. But you know that Elder Colón stated we weren't supposed to get involved in the mystical side of things, and your relationship with Ranma is..."

"None of your business! Grandmother might've said that, but my heart still wants Ranma. I will have him, and we will be happy together!"

"No matter what his heart says?" Mousse shot back. "He's told you several times he's not interested, Shampoo!" Mousse shot back, grinding his teeth to keep from shouting.

“He’s a stupid male, Ranma not know what good for him!” Shampoo shouted back, for some reason switching to Japanese for a second. “I will show him what I can offer him is better than that demonic slut or the Japanese knockoff and prove to him that he loves me, and that my way is the best way! Know your place, Stupid Mousse!” she finished, hand flashing out not in a punch, but a slap across the face, staggering Mousse and nearly sending him sideways.

As a master of the Hidden Weapons Style, Mousse was treated almost as a blooded warrior and garnered a lot of respect from within the Joketsuzoku because of it despite his being a man. Shampoo, despite her position as Cologne’s heir, was not thought of as a blooded warrior yet, and the slap was highly disrespectful, something that Mousse, no longer blinded by his devotion, could well understand, even if he could think of hundreds of other things Shampoo had done to him that were far more so. Nevertheless, that slap coming now as it did meant far more than simply not respecting his position as a martial artist.

No, coming as it did in the midst of what had been a simple argument that slap showed precisely how much Shampoo respected and cared for Mousse as a person. That is, not at all for both.

It was as if that slap was the final straw dropped on a camel’s back, creating a cascade of realization within him almost with a physical force to match the slap itself. The last of his blinders when it came to Shampoo fell away from his eyes, and as Mousse straightened, he stared back at her, shaking his head from side to side. “Have you always been a harridan, or has the past few years of not getting your own way that is finally brought out your true self?”

He hadn’t really meant that has a taunt, more a statement of fact, but Shampoo took it that way. Moreover in her present state of mind, still fresh off the dressing down Ranma had given her, there was only one way Shampoo was going to take any kind of taunting. With a shriek, she charged forwards, throwing a punch towards Mousse’s face.

Mousse dodged, wondering aloud again, “Have you always been this slow?”

“I will show you slow!” Shampoo hissed, her arms disappearing into the Amaguriken technique.

However, Mousse simply battered her attacks aside, then reached out and lightly tapped towards the side of her face. He could’ve slapped her like she had him a second ago, but even now, that felt wrong. “Just stop it!”

Yet if he thought that showing how outmatched she was would slow Shampoo down or calm her down at all, Mousse was sadly mistaken. She kept pressing the attack, launching Amaguriken speed punches and elbow blows as fast as possible. She had lost her weapons in the battle in the forest, but seemed determined to punish Mousse for his temerity.

Ducking under a series of punches, Mousse lashed out, the weapons space in that sleeve opening. Out of his sleeve came a rope, which instantly tied around Shampoo's waist. She barely had a second to yelp before she found herself tugged into a blow that caught her in the head, making her head ring.

She struggled through it, but that momentary daze allowed Mousse to flick open a water bottle and poured over her head. The next instant, she was in cat form and even as she tried to leap away, freed of the rope around her waist. Mousse hopped up and over her, a cage slamming down around the cat.

Pulling the cage up and sliding the bottom into place was a little tricky. By the time he was done, Mousse's hand was scratched several times but eventually was able to, and Shampoo was stuck in her his cage. The same cage, quite ironically, that she and Cologne had used to house Mousse in his duck form so many times back in Nerima as punishment after he had caused trouble.

"You're going to stay there until we meet up with Elder Cologne back in Kuoh. I am done with you, Shampoo," Mousse said, stumbling only slightly over the words, his eyes wide, nearly manic, as he stared at the cat in the cage.

Shampoo hissed at him, clawing at the cage, but despite being a cat herself, her claws had none of the power that the Neko-Ken gave Ranma. She could not cut them through, and continued to hiss as Mousse turned, hopping away through the night, musing to himself, "I really must do something nice for Asia in the next few days. Her pep talk helped a great deal. Or maybe get her something nice? Flowers. All girls like flowers, right? That's not just a dating thing, right? Not that there would be anything wrong with that, but I don't know if Asia-san would be open to such a thing. Hmm... perfume sounds too adult, jewelry too expensive..."

Staring through the cage at Mousse, Shampoo could only shake her head as Mousse continued to talk to himself, wondering just when the world had gone mad.

OOOOOOO

Azazel shook his head as he stared at Raynare, astonished. "Honestly, I thought that all this time Sirzechs was playing hard to get when he told us he had no idea what had happened to you. That you had died, either killed by Kokabiel and his Legion or by Rias or Sona. Now you're here, and he was telling the truth, that you escaped? I'm gonna have to eat some crow there. Still, I'm glad that you at least survived. Although how you escaped has got to be a tale."

Raynare looked a little... Azazel wasn't certain what that look was, really. Guilty, embarrassed, worried, all of those flickered across the younger fallen's expression. Not afraid to be sure, nor repentant, which Azazel felt he for damn sure should have seen on her face right now. After all, her mission hadn't actually been authorized, and whatever she said, Raynare must have known that, given how badly those orders had seemingly gone against the precedent

that he had set. *Raynare's always been a little too arrogant for her skills to back up. Well, whatever, once I've got the story how she escaped Rias and Sona I'll turn her over to Baraquiel for some punishment.*

The black-haired beauty's words made Azazel blink. "Well, I, I kind of had help."

Hoping that it wasn't Khaos Brigade style help, Azazel was about to ask her what that meant when then a kiseru-style pipe came out of nowhere, nearly embedding itself in his head. Azazel was a veteran of the Great War, though, and even as the pipe whizzed through the air faster than anything that un-aerodynamic could he had ducked under it. Whirling around his table, Azazel's fist flew into a heretofore empty portion of the room.

He hit nothing, and then two small feet landed on his outstretched arm before he could pull it back. A diminutive figure flung itself over his head, landing on the desk, turning to face him, even as Azazel attempted to punch it out of the air.

"I see you haven't slowed down at all, Az! Then again, since you're a fallen and therefore pretty much immortal even to someone like me, I don't suppose that's saying much. You should've sensed I was in the room, though. What, too comfy in your place as leader of the Grigori you're forgetting some of the tricks I showed you about finding someone hiding from normal sight?"

Azazel blinked, staring, then began to laugh. "Happosai!? Happy, you're still alive? It's been what, since before the Meiji Restoration? I'd have thought you'd have died at some point, although I noticed that you've shrunk a lot. Is that what's happening, you're just going to keep on shrinking until there's nothing left rather than keel over outright?"

"Oh haha, laugh it up. At least I'm just as spry as I always was." Happosai chuckled, hopping up and removing his pipe from where the tip of it had embedded itself in the back wall of Azazel's office. "And you should be thanking me, I'm the one that helped Raynare here get away. That at least gets me a few favors with you and your Grigori doesn't it?"

"Normally it would, if not for the fact that Raynare being alive and among us again is going to cause me a few minor diplomatic headaches. Still, I suppose we can call that even, it's not like I wanted her to die or anything. I'm also certain that you being here is going to cause me even more headaches than Raynare-chan being here. I doubt Grayfia has forgotten the last run in you had with her."

"HAH, I say again, HAH! Look me in the eyes and tell me you wouldn't have done what I did if you had the chance?" Happy said, his eyes going far away, almost glazing over in delighted memory for a moment while his hands made grasping motions.

Forgotten, near the door, Raynare shuddered a little, and shifted to one side, trying to make herself small. *Fuck me, I am not letting him do that to me again! If I stay still and small, they won't notice.*

That shudder was quickly reinforced by a lot more as Azazel seemed to think about something for a moment, then grinned, and gave Happy a thumbs up. "You've got a point there. You know, it's too boring around here, even with my experiments to run and my adopted son to clean up after occasionally. It's good to have you back, Happy."

"You have a son now?" Happy said, ignoring the adopted part of that phrase. "Does he take after you at all? Having a third to go around causing trouble with could be fun. Although for now, do you have a way to get us into Tokyo? I heard of a bar there that allows you to pick both the dancers and the lingerie they wear! You can even have them switch out occasionally if you pay for the private booths."

Azazel laughed at that, and the two men made for the door, ignoring Raynare as she stood there, staring after them. "W, what have I done?" the fallen angel whimpered. "What hell have I unleashed against all womenfolk?"

OOOOOOO

As Happosai, the Immortal Pervert of the Anything Goes School of Martial Arts and Azazel, the Immortal Lecher of the Grigori walked out the door of the latter's office, across the world, millions of women shivered. Yet one woman was not, if in fact, she couldn't be called a woman at all. As she was but a young-seeming girl perhaps a little older than Hinako, the ki vampire homeroom teacher that could only look her real age by draining the ki of others.

This young girl had long black hair, almost long enough to touch the back of her knees, hung loosely down her back. Her eyes were a bit more slitted than any Asian's, and her ears were pointed like an elf rather than a human, but even so, there was nothing to truly mark her out as all that unusual. Even her clothing matched her age perfect, a set of clothing that looked like that of an outdoorsy girl who still preferred skirts instead of pants.

In this case looks, just like with Hinako, could be deceiving. Since this young lady was indeed far older than she looked. Far, FAR older. Indeed, even if you measured this 'young' girl's age in terms of the life of a redwood tree, she would seem astonishingly cold. For this was the most powerful being in the world, Ophis, the Infinite Dragon God.

Ophis preferred to be on her human form, because it was awfully hard for her to control her power when in draconic form, and she had no wish to deal with the powers of the world coming after her all the time. It was boring, and she needed them all alive to aide her against the Great Red when she figured out a way back into her home, the Dimensional Gap. For the past two decades, Ophis had preferred to be a little girl, as it both threw off her enemies, and allowed her to go most places she wished to without much trouble.

At the moment, though, none of that mattered. What mattered was Ophis was hungry.

Patting her stomach, Ophis stood up from where she had been sitting. On the table in front of her, a report about how one of their spies might have been captured in the Underworld sat, only a few paragraphs having been read. In the contest between finishing the report or going to get something to eat, the paper was utterly unimportant.

She passed several members of the Khaos Brigade. Most of them were low-level functionaries, magicians or logistics people. Not one of the leaders was currently there, although a few were elsewhere in the sprawling base. Not that it would have mattered to Ophis if they had been.

Ophis was nearly to the entrance of the underground base when one of the guards there had the temerity to ask hesitantly, "Er, Mistress, wh where are you going?"

Turning Ophis regarded him with flat, almost dead eyes. "Since when do I need to explain my movements to you?"

Although the question was stated blandly, it still made the man shiver when coupled with that look. After a second however, she caved, however slightly. "Tell the others I am going out. I'm hungry."

With that simple, all-encompassing statement, Ophis turned and left the headquarters of the Khaos Brigade, destination unknown.

End Chapter

This was the winner of the Ranma poll for June, and while I will admit, I had to rush to get it done, I... I should have had time for at least another 10,000 words, maybe as many as 15,000 from the time I started work on it. However, this chapter fought me so hard it's not even funny. I need to think about what that might mean going forward.