

I can't draw and ain't Japanese.

A note to those of you who remember Copycat Ken from the original manga/anime. The Wiki page says he's sixteen, which would actually put him younger than Ranma if you space out Ranma's original adventures to a believable year and a half, two years. However, I decided that his general looks and attitude screamed middle-aged man to me, despite how short he looked and how thin his shoulders were. That face in the anime... To go with this idea, I will mention Copycat Ken's original appearance being different than in 1/2 canon.

This has been edited by Hiryo and me by Grammarly. Alas, Grammarly is having... issues? Weird ones? Like, it's missing some strange spelling errors and then they aren't being caught by word's normal spelling/grammar checker. So I do not doubt there will be errors.

Chapter 18: Old Legends, New Tricks

As the redhead traded blows with the Copycat Ken, who had annoyingly just transformed into a copy of herself, Ranma tried to remember what she could of the first fight she had with the transformation expert. Honestly, at the time, it had been a very weird fight, and had stayed in his mind for a bit because of that, but it had only really become a serious one, when the moron had joined forces with Happy. A story that was lamentably predictable when it came to the old, perverted master. *He always makes everything harder to deal with.*

Eventually, though, Ranma had figured out that while Copycat Ken could copy special abilities and the styles he observed after a bit, he couldn't overcome purely physical abilities like strength or speed. Before that, Ranma had been so thrown off by facing her own style mixed with that of his rivals and Copycat Ken's transformation that she hadn't realized Ken was straining to make some of those techniques work. After that, it became simply a matter of overcoming her own physical limitations to the point where Ken couldn't keep up. In a way, Ranma had Copycat Ken to thank for pushing his own Kachu Tenshin Amaguriken technique to a higher level, one that came close to matching Cologne's original at the time.

In so beating him, Ranma had seemingly pushed Copycat Ken into a sort of physical schizophrenia. Ken had become locked into a continuous loop of attempting to transform into different people in an effort to keep up with Ranma until Ken simply fainted out of sheer exhaustion. *What the hell happened to him after that? I... I remember Pops and Soun doing something, but what? It wasn't handing him over to the police, I know that. Sending him down the river out to sea, maybe? Eh, whatever. Not like it matters now.*

As they continued to trade blows, the female Ranma found that Copycat Ken was keeping up with her. *Okay, so someone's taken his training seriously since I whooped him. Interesting. This could be more fun than I thought.*

Ranma's thoughts on that score ended abruptly when Ken transformed straight from a copy of Ranma into one of Pig Boy. As he did, a blow got through the transformed thief's defenses, cracking into his face. Another hammered into his body, but the thief took them, lashing out with a bandana sword that Ranma dodged by a millimeter. Frowning in some confusion, Ranma gently redirected the next strike very slightly, then as Ken overcompensated and thus opened his defenses in a way that no martial artist would have. Ranma's next strike was at Amaguriken speed, crashing into Ryoga-Ken's side.

It did no damage, not even knocking the thief off-balance. He simply absorbed the strike like the original Ryoga would have. *And that ain't possible. That was a full-speed Amaguriken!*

Ducking under a blow that would have caught her in the face, Ranma pushed off a rising knee, flipping up and over her enemy. She landed a soft kick to the back of Ryoga-Ken's head in midair before quickly pulling up her leg to avoid a grab. She was then forced to roll as an energy blast flashed through where he had been a moment ago. *And that wasn't a green ki blast, either. That was yellow. Huh... I wonder what emotion that'd be?*

Shaking that idle thought off, Ranma landed for a brief second, then flipped herself onto her hands, doing a handstand just out of reach of Ryoga-Ken. This segued into a rising mule kick that took Copycat Ken straight in the chin midstep. This hurled him backward and out into the ocean, where he splashed, sinking for a moment out of sight.

When Copycat Ken stood up again, he was now in the form of Mousse. As he did, he lashed out towards Ranma with two long kusarigama, the scythes slashing at Ranma. "Take this, you bitch!"

"Nah, they ain't my style, man." Ranma danced in between them, flipped herself up into the air and landed on one of the chains. Mousse-Ken tried to follow, jumping in midair and dropping one of the chains, replacing it with another. Ranma then lashed out and down with several blows, shattering the scythes before grabbing the ends of the chain, pulling hard. "Alleyoop!"

As she had expected, Copycat Ken released both of the long chains this time. The next second, he was charging forward with twin Japanese swords as Ranma landed in the surf.

And that ain't possible either. No way would a copycat thief be able to better Mousse's technique. Eh... unless weapons are all he has in there. But that's still better than how he was using Mousse's technique before, changing the technique a bit rather than a straight copy.

Swiping her arms forward, Ranma created a massive wave that crashed into the charging Copycat Ken, halting his forward progress and blinding him for a second. Following through by rushing through the wave, Ranma landed several dozen blows that shattered the weapons again and forced Copycat Ken to focus on defense before he once again shifted into Pig Boy, only this time with a slightly black eye from one of Ranma's strikes, and his hands still throbbing from blows to them.

A kick took Ryoga-Ken in the side of the head, hurling him back towards the beach, where he landed with a thump. He was able to push himself to his feet and roll away before Ranma could follow up, and instead of trying, Ranma landed nearby, out of range of Ryoga-Ken for a moment. This let the thief ready two more bandana-swords, showing a preference for dual wielding.

Staring across at his opponent, Ranma nodded slowly. "Well, I suppose all of that proves it."

Copycat Ken paused, his voice coming out like Ryoga's, but his general attitude, the smirk on his lips, and the way he stood in a stance from armed Wing Chun, nothing matched Ryoga, which was somewhat disconcerting. Although Ranma figured that since it was a fight rather than Ken trying to trick his opponent, he didn't particularly care about staying in character. "Proves what? That I'm better than you this time? All of your strikes haven't done a thing! I'm going to win this time, horse-boy, and you know it!"

"You keep telling yourself that, Copycat." Ranma smirked, shaking his head. "I meant your ability with those chains and your ability to tank hits in that form. You couldn't've done that before. When you transformed before, you couldn't match the sheer physical abilities of the people you transformed into. And that energy blast, that wasn't like a real ki attack, that was some kind of magic. You've made a deal with someone, someone with leather wings, maybe?"

Copycat Ken's eyes widened, and then he laughed, clapping his hands together. "Yes! I knew it! I knew that no one as young as you could be as good as you are! Tell me, what devil family did you make a deal with? I'm curious. It was only chance that made me able to make my deal, but I figure since the tales of your abilities started so young, maybe you made a deal when you were what, twelve or so...me...th...ing..." The Copycat Thief's words trailed off as Ranma began to laugh.

"OHOHO. OHOHO. OHOHOHoho." This was not a happy, jolly laugh or even a fake sinister laugh. No, this was the laugh of someone who had decided to go full madwoman. Indeed, it almost sounded like Kodachi and Ranma had suddenly switched personalities, only Ranma's laugh was deeper, angrier, and it sent a shiver down Copycat Ken's spine, and he found himself backing away without even thinking of it. "OHOHOHOh... ah, just for thinking that I had to make a deal to be as good as I am, I'm going to hurt you even more. Congratulations, Copycat, you have evolved from a nuisance into a guinea pig."

“Wait, what’s that supposed t-GAHH!” That was as far as Copycat Ken could get before Ranma blitzed forward, showing far more speed than she had previously in this fight. Ranma was done feeling out her opponent now. Instead, she had moved on to turning this fight into training.

Copycat Ken yelped, dodging a punch that would’ve taken Ryoga-Ken right in the solar plexus by a bare inch, followed by a kick aimed at the side of his knee, but he twirled around that, bringing up his own kick in a move that Pig Boy would never have done. Ryoga very rarely used his legs for anything but jumping around or blocking in a pinch.

Even as he charged forward, though Ranma’s attention wasn’t entirely on her opponent. Instead, a part of her mind was reached inside, down the connection to the cursed springs, to Jusenkyo’s underlying chaos magic. She didn’t open a full link as then-male Ranma had twice before, sending her mental projection into the spiritual realm of Jusenkyo to the spirits that resided with the morass of magic there. Instead, Ranma just opened a smaller link, a porthole rather than a door, letting the chaos magic flow into herself. *This asshole probably wouldn’t survive any of the other weapons I can pull from there. No, it’s spell time. But how exactly am I going to use this, create in effect of some kind...*

Using some of what she had learned through conversations with Rias and Akeno, Ranma pulled at the raw chaos magic of Jusenkyo. She could feel it, a dull heat building up in her body, almost to the point of being painful. Then, using what Akeno and Rias had told her about how they crafted various spells from their own demonic magic reserves, Ranma started to mold it, forming an idea in her head.

This proved to be a mistake, and she gasped as the chaotic magic refused to be molded, bursting back down the connection to Jusenkyo. “Guh!” Ranma grunted, the feeling of that painful on a level that carried over into her body like a horrible mix of heartburn and migraine. This opened her up to a cut from Ryoga-Ken’s bandana swords, but that let Ranma lash out with a kick to the knee that caused her opponent to stumble. Even as Ranma’s skin healed, another kick caused Ryoga-Ken to grunt as his nose broke under the blow, the strike hurling Ryoga-Ken backward. He moved with it, rolling through the sand through some kid’s sand castle, causing a cry of anguish from the onlookers, but both combatants ignored them for now.

“Okay, so that didn’t work,” Ranma grumbled to herself as she chased after the thief. “What the heck did I do wrong?”

Copycat Ken was too busy holding his nose for a second to comment, then as Ranma renewed his assault, he jumped into the air, turning into a copy of Ranma as he did, his male body rather than his female one. In that form, he landed on the opposite side of a clump of onlookers who had turtled up under an umbrella rather than retreating to get out of the way. Ranma went after him and landed between Ken and the group before he could try to charge in and use his transformation powers to disappear. The two started to exchange punches and blows, Ranma’s raw physical skills overwhelming the copy of her male body in a way that would

have been impossible in real life. This let Ranma turn some of her attention back to the real matter at hand: using this fight to get a handle on using the magic of Jusenkyo.

Once more opening the connection to let some of the magic of Jusenkyo flow through, Ranma quickly began to try and mold it as it came in, wondering if maybe he had just been holding too much. Again, this attempt failed, but this time, Ranma was ready for it, and no lack of attention allowed Ken to gain the upper hand. He shifted again, this time to Mousse once more, using a spear the copy pulled out of his sleeve. This gave him more reach and won wows from the watching crowd, but Ranma danced around it, humming thoughtfully. "Hmm... so that didn't work either. Why?"

To Ranma's mind, it was like the chaos magic was water or perhaps a stress ball? *I'm trying to shape it into something, but the moment I do, it refuses to form into what I want, instead squirting out of my mental grip.* A third attempt proved that molding the magic of chaos was inherently practically impossible. *Okay, so assume that's part of the whole chaos part of this equation. If I can't form actual spells from the magic of Jusenkyo, can I just... release it? Instead of a shape, just give the magic a direction?*

The next time she pulled the magic through her connection to Jusenkyo, Ranma concentrated more on where she felt the magic was gathering within her. At first, it felt almost like it was boiling up inside her, but as he concentrated on the feeling, it changed, moving from a kind of spiritual heat into one that was centered in her body. Then, with a bit of effort, Ranma was able to shift the feeling into her fist. *Okay, and now...*

Darting forward, Ranma dove under Mousse-Ken's spear. As usual, when Ranma chose to go low instead of high, this took her opponent by surprise. Mousse-Ken was fast enough to respond, bringing up a knee to block his blow, but that did nothing to the chaos magic that Ranma released on impact, pushing it out of herself with a vague impression of 'out' being the only direction she gave the magic.

This did not result in an explosion, as most magic users would have thought, given that Ranma had essentially done only half of a regular spell. When a spell was canceled midway, it normally created a blowback, which was what Ranma had been feeling before, a jolt of inner pain. Alternatively, if the spell was a bit further along, the magic didn't form correctly upon leaving the body, resulting in an explosion of magic, a physical force released into the material plane.

Yet Chaos magic wasn't just raw magical power. It was magic consisting of a mire of various magical types that had mixed together into its own type of magic, one that had the underlying concept of chaos itself stamped into its very being.

As the magic flashed out, Ranma found her hand shifting into scales, while Copycat Ken hissed, pulling back his leg and kicking off hard with his other leg. Mousse-Ken then continued flipping away to get some distance. For the first time, Ken took his own form, his hands grabbing

at his stomach, pulling up his shirt to look at it in pure confusion. "What the, why, why does it feel as if my stomach is suddenly no longer there!? The fuck!?"

Copycat Ken was, in a startling change to his previous form, a middle-aged-looking man, although given his overall height and lack of shoulders, it was difficult to tell. You really had to look at his face, the cynical lines there, the narrow eyes and suntanned skin, to see his actual age. That, and the bit of paunch that he had, which, Ranma reflected, he wouldn't have if his stomach had just disappeared.

Deciding that was a mental thing that the chaos magic had done, or if somehow, Copycat Ken's stomach had indeed been transported elsewhere, but he had been left to live instead of quickly dying from all the internal stuff that the sudden removal of his stomach would entail, Ranma charged forwards, ignoring her scaled hand for now. "Well, that worked! Now let's see if I can do something else... maybe a bit more direction so it doesn't affect me? Hmmm..."

"Wait, wait, timeout!" Copycat Ken yelped, in his normal body, and therefore not partaking of Mousse's speed or Ryoga's durability. He desperately dodged around Ranma's first punch, then was sent flying sideways by the second one, as Ranma followed up hard, shifting into a full combo. It was all that Copycat Ken could do to get his arms up to defend himself as Ranma pushed him away from another portion of the crowd that had not read the Nerima Survival Guide, which the Nerima newspaper printed out on a weekly basis.

Which, honestly, made sense, considering they weren't in Nerima. But at least most of the people around them had decided to give whatever kind of weird show this was a wide berth.

Meanwhile, Ranma tried to craft another 'spell' such as it was. *Contact-based magic works, and direction, too, but how much direction can I give? Can I kind of... sneak in a last-second shape as the magic escapes out of me? Maybe... Numbness?*

The next second, Copycat Ken winced and looked down at his forearm as he tried to kick Ranma away, forcing Ranma to backpedal a little. "Why can't I feel my fingers!? And my stomach's back? What the fuck is going on!?"

In contrast, Ranma's entire arm had, although the scales that had covered her hand a second ago had disappeared. "So one brand of spell cancels the other, maybe, and the last-second addition of a shape works but causes a more severe blowback on me. Fun. Let's see if I can do something a bit more random work with it rather than against it..."

With that, she charged forward, and Copycat retreated still more, jumping up and over several beachgoers. The two of them had pushed their fight back into an area of the beach that was marked off by a sign as being part devoted to one of the local boardwalk restaurants.

He kicked up a table into Ranma's face, but Ranma smacked it out of the air. The magic of Jusenkyo still thrummed through his hand, releasing as he hit the object. This time, he hadn't done more than direct the magic out with a thought of 'random change' added to it.

This time, there was no backlash on his hand. Instead, the table had been turned into a large ostrich. "Hell, yes!"

The sight of that ostrich caused Copycat Ken's eyes to widen as everyone around gapped in astonishment. This included one woman quite a ways back along the route the fight had followed. That woman had only been watching the fight with half an eye, keeping most of her attention on Saeko and Asia, but now turned, gaping and hastily reaching back into her pocket for her phone. *Fuck! That is a lot of people who are going to need their minds wiped. What the hell is that idiot Ken and his opponent doing! And I need to stay here to watch Asia. I can't follow and pull them into a dimensional bubble!*

For her part, Ranma simply hopped up onto the bird's back and brought down a kick that Copycat Ken only dodged by the skin of his teeth, completely opening himself up to a punch that Ranma threw even as she passed through the area where Copycat Ken had been moments ago. This blow smashed the middle-aged thief out and into the ocean again, with such force and angle, that he bounced several times off the top of the waves, rather than sinking into the water. "Adaptation, baby! Let's hear it for Anything Goes Chaos Magic!"

What Ranma had basically created was a type of contact-based wild magic, as few people in the watching crowd who played D&D would have called it. Ranma would probably never be able to truly choose the precise effect he/she wanted from the chaos magic of the cursed springs, but as long as she kind of worked with the chaos magic, Ranma could create something in the realm of what he/she was looking for. And with how much adaptation was a part of Anything Goes, that was enough for Ranma.

Pushing himself out of the water, Ken shook his head, trying to wipe salt water from his eyes. But then Ranma was on him once more, her hands glowing with all the colors of a supernova as she cackled. "Now come on, Kenny! Let's see how much of this Chaos Magic stuff I can master before you give out on me!"

"Wa, give out on y—GA!!" And thus began Copycat Ken's no good, very bad day...

OOOOOOO

By this point, Saeko had long since fallen back from the fight, returning to where she had left Asia and Mousse after a leisurely swim. She had initially thought that perhaps Ranma would need some help to corral Copycat Ken. Considering the fact that he was a thief and a trickster, it seemed to her that running away would be one of his basic tactics. But early on in the fight, Ranma had proven up to the task of figuring out who he was even when they passed through a crowd of onlookers that hadn't yet had time to pull back.

When Saeko saw that, she felt that her services in that area were no longer warranted. Simply watching from the sidelines, considering that Ranma would not want them to gang up on his old opponent, would be a waste of time, so Saeko had decided to return to Asia.

She was quite wrong about this, in a way. Ranma, Kuno, Ryoga and Mousse had teamed up the first time Copycat Ken came into Nerima to beat the bastard down for stealing their techniques and attempting to ruin their reputations via his transformation skill. And if Ranma had forgotten how he had beaten Copycat Ken eventually, he might well have welcomed someone else around to help. Especially considering that Ranma could all too easily remember that Copycat Ken could turn into Happy, a horrifying thought for anyone who knew the ancient pervert. However, Ranma did remember and was more than willing just to overwhelm the asshole with her basic physical skills rather than any special techniques.

Well, up to the point where Ranma began to experiment, anyway. At that point, if Ken had begun to show any sign of using more magic, Ranma might well have found herself in a pickle. But he didn't. Ken's contract with the local devils didn't extend to giving him any actual magic beyond the ability to transform into more accurate versions of his victims.

Saeko found Asia sitting in the sand, surrounded by several young locals, creating a large sand castle. It seemed as if most of the kids in the immediate area at the start of the fight had begun to ignore the show, concentrating on having some fun. That made sense to Saeko, as she always enjoyed doing rather than watching. On the other hand, most of the adults and teens were still watching the site of a short redhead, even for Asians, Ranma's female form was quite short, beating up on someone who could take on the appearance of others as easily as breathing. A lot of people were wondering where the wires were or if the man was wearing particularly lifelike masks and just switching between them, ignoring the fact his clothing also changed.

Hilarious. I honestly didn't think the plan the government came up with to make certain people didn't realize the various battles in Nerima were real actually worked, but if these people are so willing to ignore the evidence of their own eyes, it could work, I suppose. Before Saeko's very eyes, dozens of people were trying either to, fitting what they were seeing into their worldview, or just move on, ignoring it entirely. I would say the human mind's ability to roll with the punches is one of our strongest assets, but in this case, I think it is more the case of deciding ignorance is better than admitting the truth. Sad.

Unlike if there was real magic or other species involved, Saeko had no desire to call Rias to come in and wipe memories, though. To her, everything had seen in the fight was simply martial arts, and thus far more normal than the idea of there being nonhuman races out there, unaware that was in the process of changing even as she walked up to Asia. *In a way, I can understand Rias and the others hiding their presence, but another part of me doesn't see the point. This is a time when I will err on not manipulating people's minds. I never felt comfortable reading or watching that kind of thing in movies.*

To Saeko's amusement, Mousse sat on the top of the tallest tower of the sand castle, sitting there with all the stoicism of a king on a throne. Currently, he was using his beaks and wings to fend off any hands that reached for him. For all that his body was a duck, the transformed Chinese martial artist conveyed a certain amount of weariness to the world, as if he was putting up with this only because he had to. Saeko figured that this reaction from the local boys and girls was something he had seen dozens of times before.

Saeko settled into the sand next to Asia, gently pulling the younger girl into a sideways hug. "Are you having fun?"

"I believe that I am, but Mousse does not seem to be," Asia whispered, looking apologetically over at Mousse. "He has garnered quite a bit of attention from the younger crowd."

Mousse looked back, then shrugged his shoulders in a world-weary fashion, his long neck drooping and, not coincidentally, avoiding a grab from one of the more annoying young boys who were helping Asia build a sand castle. He surreptitiously sent a small metal bullet into that youngster's knee, causing him to yelp and stand up hurriedly, looking down at the ground for whatever had 'bitten' him, not seeing the small ball bearing, which had buried itself into the sand nearby off the ricochet.

Saeko had been able to follow that little move, and she snickered. "Well, in that case, how about we take some time to cool off a bit in the ocean. I think we should follow up on our original mission to be here, and that second Torii gate that only I can see interests me."

She cocked an eyebrow at Mousse when she spoke, but Mousse shook his head. Whatever was blocking Asia and Ranma from seeing the second Torii gate was also working on him. *What could it be, I wonder? Not that you have to be Japanese to see it, or everyone around us will be able to see it. Not being a natural woman, Asia would count.... Both a natural woman and of a certain age? But no, again, the locals would see it as well. I haven't heard any discussions about it, despite the fact that two Torii gates being so close together like that would be very strange. Especially considering their placement, one is on top of the large rock, the other on a small crevice near the waterline. Could it be family-related?*

She shook her head, snickering a bit to herself, one hand raising to hide her mouth for a moment in a genteel manner. Even so, Asia heard and looked at her in confusion. "Oh, nothing Asia-chan. I was just thinking about what kind of prerequisite there is to be able to see that second Torii gate. Then I realized with my lack of magic I could more likely catch a bird on the wing than figure it out, and then realized with all my training, that wouldn't be all that hard."

Mousse snorted in a very un-ducklike sound, while Asia smiled, too. A moment later, the two girls pushed themselves to their feet, with Asia taking Mousse in her arms and stepping around the muttering or pouting kids who wanted to play with the duck more. Although, Saeko was amused to know that a few of the boys closer to Asia's age were sadder that she was

leaving. Two in particular tried to convince her to stay, with one going so far as to say, "Heck, just send the duck off with the old lady and come and play with us!"

With a faint scowl on her face, Saeko reached down, grabbing the offending youngster's head and squeezing very lightly for her, but enough to cause him to whimper. "Who exactly is an old lady, little brat?" Saeko said, her normal manners in stark abeyance for a moment as she tossed the boy towards his equally loud-mouthed fellow, sending both sprawling. "I'm only eighteen!"

"That means you're an adult, which means her over-the-hill, lady!" one of the other little girls said, then gleefully laughed as Saeko turned in her direction, glowering enough to send all of them running. "EEE, run away, or else the purple-haired witch'll curse us!"

"Ugh. Eighteen is old? Since when? Honestly, children can be such annoyances." With a sigh, Saeko shook her head and gently pushed Asia towards the water again, ignoring the girl's pout in her direction for her being a little mean for a moment there. "Come Asia-chan. We have a mystery to explore."

Soon, the two of them were wading into the ocean. As they did, Mousse quickly pushed out of Asia's arms. "Are we just going to swim out there?" Asia questioned. "Only, I think those buoys are supposed to mark the point where swimmers have to stop, right?"

"Probably due to concerns that they would hurt themselves in the rocks or that the undertow near those rocks might be a little too strong for most swimmers, Asia-chan. However, I haven't seen any evidence of that second point, and the first one is silly, at least when it comes to me. Given all the tough training I've had under Ranma, I really don't want to meet the natural rock formation that could scrape my skin, let alone do anything else," Saeko answered drolly.

Mousse quacked an agreement with that, swimming along easily beside Asia. Unlike Saeko, who swam through the water with almost insouciant disregard for the other beachgoers all around them, Mousse took his Cologne-proclaimed position as Asia's bodyguard seriously. He twisted his long, sinuous neck this way and that to watch the other swimmers, looking out for any dangers.

Yet because he was looking for close-in danger, both Mousse and Saeko missed the site of the young woman sitting on a bench on the catwalk overlooking the beach who had responded to Ranma's use of chaos magic a few moments earlier. With Ranma and Ken, a known client of House Astaroth she had actually come down to the beach to meet, moving away, the young woman, Gea turned her attention back to Asia Argento. As Diodora's queen, Gea was well aware of his... lusts for Holy Maidens as a whole and Asia Argento, the one who got away, in particular. Seeing her had shifted her current mission the moment Gea had seen Asia, and now, once more, she began typing something out on the phone, following up on an earlier report, her eyes never failing to stray too far from Asia.

I might earn praise for spotting her here in Astaroth territory, but if nothing comes of this bit of serendipity... Gea shivered. Diodora's wrath would be terrible on any servant who failed him. *I can only hope the others arrive in time. I have no idea what that purple-haired girl is, but given how she was able to follow what is going on with Ken and that redhead, I don't want to take her on, not without someone else nearby to gather up Argento if she runs away.*

Back in the water, Asia was dealing with swimming in the ocean for the first time, although this wasn't the first time that Asia had gone swimming. Indeed, as part of her exercise regimen as a holy maiden had been to swim in a local lake at least three times a week in the summer and spring. The waves were causing her some issues now. At first, she had quite a bit of fun with them, but as they moved further away from the shoreline, Asia started to struggle a bit, not getting the timing right to move through the waves with the same ease Saeko could.

Eventually, Asia got a handle on it, and the group pushed on. When they reached the line of buoys that warned against swimming further, Mousse flapped his wings, taking off the surface of the water and flying forward several dozen yards. This gave Saeko the excuse to ignore the lifeguards, and she went after him quickly, even as the lifeguards began blowing their whistles or shouting at her to come back over that line.

The pair of them had discussed this a moment before, Asia paused, letting Saeko seemingly continue the chase of Mousse on her own. Although none on the shore or anywhere else in the water seemed to notice that Mousse always kept one eye on where Asia was currently floating.

Gea saw this from where she was sitting and cursed volubly. *FUCKKKK!!! If I was better at transfiguration and could count on them to still be there if I ran off to change, I could head out there after them, capture Argento and present her to Diodora-sama on my own! But I, I can't just leave, no matter the chance to impress him. If it backfired... Gea again shuddered at what Diodora would do to her if that happened and just kept watching for now.*

Soon, the transformed martial artist and Saeko reached the stone, where the ducks settled on a portion of the rock near the normal Torii gate set into the top of the rock formation. When she reached the base of the rocks, Saeko grabbed a portion of the rock sticking out from the rest and flipped herself up and out of the water in a smooth upward flip. A moment later, she landed near Mousse, making a grab for him, only for the duck to dodge out of the way. In the distance, catcalls and laughter could be heard, along with the whistling of the lifeguard in charge of this stretch of the shore as the people on the beach reacted to this, a second show that day.

As little as half a year ago, I don't think I would've been able to do that so easily, Saeko thought to herself as she shakily tried to reach for Mousse again, who dodged down towards where Saeko had earlier pointed out the location of the second Torii gate. Certainly, I would've been able to perform a flip on a monkey bar, but not that far, and certainly not with the water both fighting the movement and weighing me down.

When he landed, Mousse made a surprised-sounding noise, flapping his wings as if he were having trouble finding his balance. He then settled down, staring down at where he was sitting, his body strangely reflecting consternation to Saeko.

To anyone else, it would seem as if Mousse had landed on a random piece or rocky outcropping. To Saeko, however? It looked very different. For one thing, he had landed behind the Torii gate from the perspective of someone on the shore. Even stranger to Saeko, underneath Mousse, was not just Mousse's shadow but a jagged hole in the rock leading downward.

He was not sitting on the hole's edge or anything. He was sitting on air in the middle of it. Around two feet in circumference, portions of the hole looked a little too regular to be natural, while the rest of it seemed a little more jagged.

Saeko climbed down quickly, keeping one eye looking at Mousse. As she did, Saeko realized that the bottom of the hole could not be seen despite the sun being high in the sky. Indeed, from this angle, it was almost angling straight down, but even so, the bottom could not be seen, and there was no way Mousse's shadow or bulk should have stopped Saeko from doing so unless the bottom of the hole was at least a full body length's straight down or more. *I wonder how far down it goes?*

Scrambling down, the purplette finally 'caught' Mousse, much to the cheers of the crowd of onlookers on the shore or swimming near Asia. Mousse shifted every which way as if trying to fight out of her grip, but she stroked his back, and he calmed down quickly.

This far away from anyone else, they didn't have to keep their voices down, and she asked, "And you still can't see anything? Not the gate, not that hole behind it? You are sitting 'on' the hole in midair as if your rear is touching solid earth! This magic stuff is sometimes very off-putting."

"Quack. Quack quack," Mousse intoned, flapping a wing towards the hole.

"What do you mean you can't see it, but you couldn't feel it either?" Saeko asked in confusion. "You could feel something there?"

"Quack. Quack quack quack," Mousse said, and somehow, Saeko was able to understand him. She had begun to do so a while back but had refused to look into why too closely, thinking that perhaps it was Ranma's type of madness spreading. Thus, while Mousse might well have just made duck noises, her mind interpreted them as a full sentence, explaining that he had felt himself settle into something much like moss, but with no loss visible moss on the rocks, that hadn't made much sense to the duck. He still couldn't see either the gate or the tunnel, though.

The term tunnel seemed more accurate at present to Saeko as she gazed down into the hole. With Mousse out of the way, she could stare straight down, yet still could make out no bottom. The shadow of the tunnel itself blocked him from seeing anything.

Scrambling for a moment, Saeko kicked a seashell off its perch and into the hole, watching for a moment as if she was resting from her brief chase of the duck. She waited and instead of hearing any kind of sound, heard nothing. Not a clunk, not a splash from below, but simply nothing, causing her to frown a bit. *I wonder what is down there? It can't be that deep. I should have heard some--*

Her thoughts cut off as, at last, she heard a noise like a distant splash. "Oh, joy. Both deep and ending in water. But if someone has gone out of their way to both mark the location of this tunnel and then hide it magically, there must be something down there. And if I can see through the magical protections, well, that just makes me even more eager to explore."

Mousse gave Saeko a very jaundiced look, then slowly shook his head from side to side. "Quack. Quack. Quack."

"I don't need the sarcasm, thank you. I understand that if someone is going to the lengths of magically hiding something, it might have more defenses somehow. But important to our search or not, or if there is still something hidden there after so long, I think we still need to explore, don't you?"

Mousse agreed with that with aplomb, nodding his head, and Saeko pushed off of the rock, landing feet first into the water. After a moment, she began to head back to Asia with Mousse tucked under one arm, swimming through the water with just one arm and her legs.

Once back in the safe swimming zone, Saeko handed the duck over to Asia, who, after stroking it and admonishing it, let it go, pushing Mousse back toward the shore. The three of them swam back to the water with Mousse apparently in the lead once more while those around them, with the excitement past, turned their attentions back to themselves. Even the distant lifeguard had ceased shouting or blowing his whistle.

Saeko reported what she had seen. "I think we're going to have to come back at night to explore more when there are no lifeguards or anyone else about to see what is going on. I doubt that if there is something important down there, that strange dimensional bubbles spell that the devils and fallen use would be able to pull whatever it is in there in. We will need to be careful to not be seen exploring something that no one else can discern."

Saeko was honestly talking out of her rear on that point, and knew it. She had no idea about the limitations or effects of the dimensional bubble spell beyond how to sense and break in or out of one, so perhaps that could be a possible way to explore down there?

Having looked into the hole and having tested it a bit, Saeko was almost certain that whatever was down there was far deeper than the rock itself. Deep into the ocean floor below, in fact. While Saeko was confident she could hold her breath for a good long while, the idea of doing so in a small, enclosed tunnel was nervous making. No, she would need a flashlight and a small air tank, at the very least.

“Why don’t we just send Mousse down there in duck form? Ducks can dive deeper than humans, right?” Asia asked, trailing off as she wondered if that was indeed the case. “Er, and he’s a martial artist, which means he can dive way deeper than even most ducks.”

Mousse shrugged and through a series of quacks, conveyed that was something of a misconception in terms of ducks diving. Beyond that, he could actually swim quite well, both in duck form and in his male body. He even had a small rebreather for his duck form. Yet with a gesture backward with one wing, he explained that he probably couldn’t go through that hole. Whatever had allowed him to just sort of sit in midair over it would almost certainly block any actual efforts to try to get past it.

That made sense to Asia, who had missed that aspect during the retelling. She nodded, asking politely what else they should do for now while Ranma was busy dealing out justice elsewhere.

Shrugging, Saeko shifted their swim and that the direction of the ongoing battle, saying, “We should probably be nearby once Ranma wins, I think.”

Both she and Mousse once more missed the watcher in the distance or the fact that she had been joined by two other young women who sat next to her, leaning in and talking to her quietly. It would take a bit to gather their numbers, but Diodora had given the order. Argento was to be taken, regardless of who got in the way.

OOOOOOO

Elsewhere in the city, Rias would’ve been able to explain what Saeko saw, at least in part.

As she had told Ranma and the others, Rias had first gone to one of the local libraries. There, she used a computer to look up old stories, local mysteries, legends and such things. This included reading up more about the Shinto religion as a whole. Despite being a committed weeaboo, Rias hadn’t really delved into the Shinto religion, only doing so in conjunction with Akeno, whose family was one of three that the Underworld knew continued to practice traditional Japanese magic, utterly unconnected to the various Magicians Guilds who had made agreements with various devils to gain access to magic.

So she knew quite a bit on the magical side of things but not the religious aspect, which, in Akeno’s terms when Rias had recently asked her for more of a background on it was, “More form than function, more faith than fact, and more an excuse to simply dress up and look pretty

than anything else. I believed that when I was younger, and I have seen no reason to change my opinion since. Gods are dead, and while spirits exist, there is no power in them.”

To which Rias had replied, “Considering your body type is enough to make anything you wear into a fetish for someone, doesn’t tell me all that much,” in an effort to move past the sudden spike of anger and sadness she could see in her friend. This worked, and the conversation had devolved into teasing, with Rias, unfortunately, getting the worst of it as she always did from her queen. Rias just couldn’t keep her cool like Akeno could, especially considering what was going on between her, Saeko and Ranma.

More importantly to Rika and Ranma, perhaps, Rias first devoted the first few hours of research to looking into anything new in terms of violent deaths, disappearances and so forth. Any violent or dangerous crimes in the past few years that could perhaps be explained only by those who knew about magic, martial arts or the Three Factions in general. She had found a few things that pointed to martial artist-type stuff and the recent string of burglaries that they’d heard about, while Rias had been out on a semi-date with Ranma and Saeko, but nothing definitive.

This was good because it meant that if there were devils or fallen in the area, they were following the rules, so to speak. No strays or mad exorcists would be found here, which let Rias turn her attention to the other topics of her research.

Soon, she did find a few strange rumors and odd legends, some of which were based on provable fact. First of all, two of the temples in the city had apparently been the topic of local controversies, so much so that when she began to look into the local temples, those stories popped up first.

One of the temples had been the site of an attempted arson, only for the monks to somehow subdue a group of six youths who were hoping to vandalize the area. Knowing what Rias did about martial artists in general, the idea of a single monkey subduing six bugs wasn’t all that far-fetched, so that story really didn’t garner much attention. The fact the temple had withstood dozens of attempts to buy the land it was on, despite the municipal government being behind several of those schemes, was more interesting to her, and she copied the address out.

The second temple had long fought against a rumor that there was some kind of treasure within its walls or buried underneath it. Where those rumors came from, Rias couldn’t track down, yet it had reached the level of a local legend, like pirate treasure in the Caribbean. Going back nearly a hundred years there had been attempts to break into the temple to search, only for none of the attempts to succeed. The latest one was barely two months old and looked to have been organized by yakuza of some kind only to run into the monks of the place. With Japans clampdown on guns, the criminals only had knives, swords and other things, and against the trained monks had faired poorly.

Still, while interesting, those two stories only whetted Rias' appetite to learn more. And there were several local legends to follow up on too. One of which, the one which would have allowed her to explain what Saeko was seeing down at the shoreline, was the strange report of a double Torii gate.

The story went that a second Torii gate would appear near one of the known gates scattered throughout Fukuoka. Sometimes, it would be near the Torii gates of the Temple; sometimes, it would be near one of the historical markers. There seemed to be no rhyme nor reason as to where it would appear, at least at first, save that it would be near a real Torii gate. Putting it all together and thanking Sona for their little rivalry that had pushed her to master the ability to read reports and analyze things, Rias felt that the shifts in where the second gate appeared had something to do with the seasons or the tides.

Furthermore, after another hour's work, Rias leaned back, reaching up idly and taking the tip of her ahoge, sticking it into her mouth as she thought. So, this Torii gate is more than likely linked to people disappearing. Not many, one every few years or so, but enough to be noticeable.

It would have taken someone quite a bit to link the legends with the missing persons, and Rias well understood that humans wouldn't normally think to look into legends or local mysteries like that and connect them to 'real life events' such as people going missing. However, to Rias, it was very clear. Furthermore, the missing people were always of a specific type. They were always alone while in the same area as the second Torii gate had been rumored to be seen. They were young and fit and mostly known for being adventurous judging from the few old newspaper reports she was able to discover of the various missing people. A few of them also mentioned the missing person as being somewhat religious, and Rias marked that down as well, even as she decided to shift her attention away from the second Torii gate mystery.

The next story she found, though, was just too ridiculous to believe, and as she stared at it, she slowly allowed her ahoge to escape her mouth, and then slapped her face with one hand, just shaking her head incredulously. *The wandering Jingai temple!? Really? A temple that wanders around, sometimes sitting down, other times mostly in the air? No. That's just not possible. Why would anyone want something like that? And if you had it, why wouldn't you keep it in a dimensional bubble? If you did that, no one without magic enough to burst the bubble would be able to see it.*

Even as she dismissed it, though, Rias was forced to remember a story that Ranma had told her. *Wasn't there some, some kind of floating Hot Spring kingdom? Or was it a floating giant elephant?* Ranma had told her so many bizarre stories that several of them had flowed together in her mind.

Unfortunately, there was nothing about the sword they were here to find, and, with a shake of her head, Rias decided to leave local legends for now, determining that she could come back later to them. Although she did note down the location of the two temples that had been

involved in the local stories she had read. Those would be her first stops after leaving the library. She also made a note to speak to Rika about checking police files for the missing people. There had to be more to their disappearances than just all of them being young and energetic. Some other thread that somehow set them apart, that let them interact with this wandering Torii gate when few could even see it.

Honestly, I don't think that it's a danger per se. The disappearances are way too spaced out for it to be deliberately killing people. One this year, the last before that six years ago, then three in quick succession twelve years ago, then a period of silence, although before that, there had been a rash of disappearances right after World War II. It's too random, unless whatever is there is somehow weakening? That could explain why there haven't been nearly as many disappearances in the past ten years or so.

With a note to Rika made, Rias copied her findings to her cell phone and then turned her attention to researching the Shinto religion in general to give her a baseline. She learned more about their gods, the various religious practices, and the pillars of what made the Shinto religion what it was today. With all that done, she took a brief break to stretch her legs, then came back and began to research more on the so-called mystical side of things, the aspect of the Shinto religion that wasn't directly connected to gods or the various ceremonies.

Here, she learned a few things that she hadn't learned before. Through Akeno, Rias had known that the three families still practicing traditional Shinto magic were experts at hiding, anti-demon or fallen magic or just generally anti-nonhuman spells. Their kotodama could hide buildings or people with ease, ward them against demons, fallen or whatever and had in the past been used to dominate or create servants from youkai. That wasn't allowed any longer, of course, given the youkai organizing into an association based out of Kyoto, an association that had the backing of the Underworld.

What Rias hadn't realized was that most of this was based on the power of words and giving words specific meanings. Or rather definition. Purity and impurity, for example. A spell created by a kotodama could have the definition of the word purity or impurity changed for that spell, to create conflict between two opposing opposites. Further, while Akeno had been dismissive of the religious aspect of the Shinto religion, prayers to the various kami mattered far more than in simple religious circumstances. There were thousands of old stories that other people had gathered together on the Internet to note that praying to specific kami and performing small rituals could create spells of impressive power for humans who hadn't become magicians.

Some of that Rias had expected. Nevertheless, what she hadn't expected was the very strange, very Japanese concept of Ma having originated from within the Shinto religion.

This concept could be translated to 'silence as a solid function', a part of a greater whole. For example, a pause in the story to give more emphasis to what had gone before and what would happen after. Blank areas between one type of scenery and another could be used to

emphasize both. There was a distinct connection between that and the idea that the definitions of pure and impure could be changed if there was also a distinct difference between the designated states. There were a few articles that dealt with the supposed spells of the Shinto religion that mentioned Ma as well, but most of them were based on mere hearsay or ancient paintings or texts, so she wasn't certain what this would mean for their research going forward.

At least, at that point, she wasn't. However, that question was answered quickly when Rias went to one of the two temples that she had learned of through her research.

The temple itself was amazing, and Rias pulled out her phone and took several pictures as she walked up the steps to it. Much like the Temple where Akeno occasionally performed tea ceremonies in, it was set on a small man-made hill within Fukuoka, although this one didn't look nearly as unnatural. The area around the temple was a suburban sprawl, dominated by one or three-story houses, making the temple the only claim to fame the district had. Yet it was very obviously not a big tourist trap, as there wasn't any kind of crowd near or leading up into the temple.

At the top of the stairs were two large statues, shaped in to the shape of foxes. Rias spent several moments looking at them, examining them not with just her eyes but with her magical senses to make certain that there was no kind of ward or anything that she would run into if she stepped between them. Rias passed through that area before pausing, looking at the temple itself. It was a single-story building, a very traditional type of temple, much like Toyokawa Inari Temple in Tokyo. Smaller, though, and the colors were a little more subdued. Not because the temple wasn't being maintained, but almost as if by personal choice. This temple did not want to stand out any more than necessary.

However, that was what Rias' eyes were telling her. Rias' magical senses were telling her a lot more. There was... a shape of something here. Along the line, separating the steps and the way down the hill was a faint line of nothingness, undoubtedly running around the entire temple. It was as if stepping from one portion of that line across to the other would be like stepping into some other realm. Rias wasn't exactly unused to that kind of concept, but here, the effect was being created in a way that she had not run into before. And it was making her extremely wary, as with that feeling, she was getting the impression that the land separated by this bit of Ma would not be welcome to her arrival. To say nothing of the effect of crossing that nothing-zone. Rias could tell that would be difficult and painful.

As she watched, a monk came out of the temple, dressed in traditional Shinto robes, although a part of Rias' mind commented that the Shinto robes were not nearly as flattering for priests as it was for shrine maidens like Akeno. As she watched, he mumbled something under his breath and, with a wooden ladle and wooden bucket, began to splash water down on the bottom steps leading up into the temple. Like a lot of traditional Japanese housing, the temple was set on a slightly elevated base.

As he did, Rias nearly flinched away, her magical senses blaring a warning as she looked at the water. To Rias, that water gleamed with Light Magic. Like the Light Spears of an angel or fallen, that was complete anathema to devil kind, which could only be overcome through raw magical power. *What the heck! I hadn't seen anything like that before! I wonder, if Akeno had stayed with her family for longer, if her mother had lived long enough to teach Akeno more, would she be able to bless water like that? I thought only the Church could do that kind of thing!*

At that point, Rias paused, no longer hearing the splash of the water. She looked up slightly, finding the monk had paused in his work and was looking back at her.

Not one to shy away, Rias smiled back pleasantly, then moved forward, pausing just outside that strange line of nothingness, pressing her hands together respectfully in front of her as she bowed before turning away, thinking deeply about what she had sensed there. *Is that an example of the concept of Ma? If so, it is remarkably disconcerting. I don't know if I could force myself across that line frankly. And the very idea of stepping on it gives me the shivers.*

Behind her, the monk looked after, a faint but amused smile on his own face. "Well, she is both a stranger and respectful. That's nice."

Leaving that area and heading to the next temple took a few hours, but she arrived at the second temple at around the same time that Saeko and Asia returned to the beach from their brief excursion out into the water.

This temple was also extremely well preserved, although it wasn't on a rise like most would have been. It was around the same size, although the grounds around the temple were smaller, possibly because of its more central location within the city. The area around it wasn't just suburban but a mix of suburban and small shops and a large motorcycle dealership of all things.

Where the other temple had a small copse of trees directly behind it, this one had a few dozen well-cared-for trees on the grounds on either side of the paved walking path that became a more sprawling sort of forest that surrounded the temple on three sides. The walking path was wide and well-maintained, leading up to the entrance to the temple itself. And all of them were littered with kotodama despite it not being the season for such.

Normally, people would only hang that kind of thing at the end of the year, buying the charms from the temple. They would then write the recipient on the back of a small command, hanging the prayer on a tree before praying for happiness or for the charm to work at the temple as they left an offering.

Now, Rias had seen dozens, maybe as many as hundreds, of these charms before. Even though the temple Akeno sometimes worked in had mostly shifted to be a teahouse, there were still people who came by to hang their charms up there, and there were a few other temples near Kuoh.

None of those charms had gleamed with magical energy like some of these did. A kind of dirty white color to the redhead's senses.

Not all of them, but more than enough to make Rias hum thoughtfully, cocking her head as she stared at them. She did not reach out to touch them however, instead, stepping off of the walkway onto the grass, moving between the trees and slowly circling the temple. As she did, she kept staring around her with her magical senses and eventually noticed small statues set into the ground in such a way that only their heads could be seen above ground. Staring at them, she could see magical energy within them. Whatever defense this temple had, it wasn't the same sort as the other one for some reason. *Perhaps because they are devoted to different gods?*

The Shinto religion had many different gods, like Amaterasu the sun goddess, or her brother Susanoo, the god of storms. And while most temples were not devoted in particular to one spirit or another, some were.

Her wandering around the temple had brought her back to the walkway leading into it, and she paused there, once more pulling out her phone. This was a special phone, one created by Maou Beelzebub to run on a devil's natural magical aura, and which could do everything a ultra modern cell phone could. She began taking pictures even as she dialed Akeno's number and a second later, her friend picked up quickly, saying hurriedly, "Rias-sama, is there anything wrong? You called us this morning, so..."

"No, nothing's wrong, I'm just sending you some pictures. I know you like the architecture of temples, even if you don't really see the point of some of the Shinto practices," Rias said obliquely. While the other temple hadn't really had many people around it, there were a few here, and there was a young looking monk helping several people near a few of the trees. He had looked at her a little oddly when she began to meander off through the trees but hadn't stopped her, but he was within earshot of the moment. "I might want to find out the name of the company that maintains this place. Maybe they can restore the one you work at."

Shifting to FaceTime, Rias held up her phone, allowing Akeno to see through the phone what was in front of her for a few moments. She heard Akeno's soft "Mah" and knew that Akeno both liked what she was seeing and could see the same magical flickers as she could in the various charms on the trees. "That is lovely. You're making me quite jealous right now."

Rias shrugged and, more to make conversation than anything else started off again off of the cobbled walkway and into the copse of trees once more. "If we do start to go around to old religious sites after this, maybe you can join us. Once we drop off Rika and Shizuka anyway."

"I knew that Rika was driving you all, and if we do start to go around, I'm afraid one of us is going to have to try to get a driver's license. And considering how both you and I drive in those driving games we've played occasionally with Koneko, I really don't think it should be either of us," Akeno replied dryly. "But who is Shizuka?"

“A now unemployed school nurse and apparently Rika’s lover. She’s a bit of an airhead, a true blonde, and also? She has bigger tits than even you,” Rias answered, deliberately crude with her last few words as they moved away from the monk or anyone else who could listen in. “I think that Rika showed us a picture at one point during the victory celebration.”

“Truly?” Not bringing the image to mind, Akeno shrugged it off, wanting to clarify a far more pertinent question from her perspective. “And you say she has a larger chest than me? But she’s human, isn’t she? I would wince in sympathy for any woman who had my size or bigger that didn’t also have devil powers to help deal with it.”

“She’s purely human. Although I wouldn’t put it past the gods of randomness and hentai to create a Sacred Gear that only helps you deal with your boobs. Or just gives you giant tits outright without all the trouble they would normally cause.”

The two women shared a laugh at that, by which point Rias had come to where she could see through the trees around her the head of the bald statue. “More seriously, are you able to see anything on a magical level through my phone?” While Rias knew that audible spells could pass through various electronic or physical mediums, they had never tested to see if their magical senses could work through a video call or phone, even one like a Beelze-tech phone like this.

To her gratification, Akeno nodded. “I do not think I am making out as much detail as you can, but I was able to see a few of those charms were actually magical before. Now, I presume you want me to try and figure out what kind of ward is set into that stone?”

“That’s it exactly. I’ve been able to find out a lot about a few of the local mysteries, and sifting through the chaff, I think there’s one that we should follow up on, perhaps in conjunction with the sword we’re here to find. I’ve even read more about Shinto religion in general, and ancient legends and myths ascribed to the magic those Shinto monks or priestesses could do.”

Unseen to Rias at the moment considering that she had the video camera turned towards the half-buried statue that was the topic of conversation at the moment, Akeno’s face twisted into a very complicated expression. While she enjoyed dressing up as a priestess and had learned enough from her mother before being forced to run away from the rest of her extended family that came with a priestess and a few of the religious practices, in the main, thinking about that part of her life always pained her. Thus, Akeno’s feelings towards the Shinto religion in general were very mixed.

Before Akeno could reply, an elderly voice spoke up from between a few of the trees, presaging a very elderly monk who stepped out from around the trees towards Rias. “Normally, it would be my place to tell you that this area is for quiet contemplation and solitude. However, looking at you, I have to wonder instead what a devil is doing so near my temple?”

Rias backed away, then, flicking her phone around, smiled at her friend, saying, "I'll call you back in a bit." With that, she hung up on her friend and gave her full attention to the monk, frowning a little. He was short, coming up to only her belly button and although he looked far more fit and in shape than happy, his face resembled Happy's enough that she was forced to ask, "Are you any relation to a Grand Master Happosai of the Anything Goes school of martial arts?"

The old monk blinked, frowning pensively as if he were trying to remember something. Then his eyes widened, and he shook his head rapidly, looking far too panicked for a moment to fit the image of the poised elderly monk he had seemed a moment before. "**No!** I am in no way related to that, that menace to females everywhere." He paused then, allowing his eyes to rake over Rias' form, not in a lustful manner, but rather an assessing one. "Although if that creature is still alive and has crossed your path, I do not doubt that the experience has stuck in your mind. We sell charms that are meant to keep away those with foul thoughts if you are interested."

"I might actually take you up on that. Considering that Happosai is something of a criminal to us as well as generally being Happosai," Rias answered a bit weekly, although internally, she was very relieved that he didn't have any connection to Happy himself. "You don't seem thrown by the fact that I am a devil, sir. Might I ask what gave me away? Did I accidentally trip a ward or something?" While Rias felt that she would've seen something like that, as she had all day, Rias also knew that she was somewhat inexperienced in that area, so it was within the realm of possibility that she could've missed something.

"No, no. Nothing like that. When you get to be my age, it is often easy to see when someone isn't human or more than they seem. And those of us still keep to the old ways here in Fukuoka and elsewhere have long known that this territory had been seemingly cleaned by a group of devils."

"That is news to me, as I am not from this area, sir," Rias answered politely. Internally, she cursed inside the privacy of her own head. *Drat! I wish the various devil houses were more open about where their territories were. If I had known that we would be in another clan's territory, I would've called ahead, made an appointment to ask for permission to be in the area. As it is, I've given them some grounds to protest. Although, obviously, if they protested to my parents, I couldn't care less. But I have to be aware that barging in like this could also affect my older brother if the family is one of the pillar clans.*

Despite her internal worries on that score, Rias wasn't about to miss the chance to talk to an actual Shinto monk, one who, as he put it, practiced the old ways. But even there, there was a question that had to be answered first. "My name is Rias Gremory. But I know your name, sir?"

"I am Linfai Shinra." The older man's eyes flickered as Rias blinked, and he smiled a bit. "I see you know the name. Interesting. It is known within the clan that many of us do have dealings with one faction or another, but I do not personally deal with such. Contained the

temple here, which has been in the clan for generations. Although the other temples in Fukuoka might have been abandoned by the clans who should have looked after them, I remained here. As did young Kabuto.”

The monk she had seen earlier that day being called young by anyone, even by this revered elder, made Rias his eyes cross a bit. Nevertheless, she nodded pleasantly and stated, “Yes, I do know of the Shinra clan. Tsubaki Shinra goes to the same school I go to.”

“Devils going to school, then I suppose you would be the rumored redheaded heiress. While I am not one for gossip, the news that young Tsubaki had somehow been able to control her inexplicable ability to draw dark spirits to her was a fascinating bit of rumor, and some of Kuoh’s uniqueness is known to me. Yet I sense that you are here for a purpose. Might I know what it is?”

Rias nodded, and stated forcefully that she was not here to cause trouble for either the temple or the city as a whole. “I am here simply to research local legends and see if we can find an ancient relic. If you and your clan or temple has already claimed that relic, then we will walk away.”

“You’re devils. Excuse me if I do not think that your word in such a matter would be worth much.” Although the words had somebody to them, the older man’s face was more thoughtful than condemning, and after a moment, he turned and, with Rias watching, leaned down to place a small token on top of the half-buried statue, the sort that oftentimes could be found lining roads or used as markers in forests. “Please, follow me. If this conversation is going to go over long, I think that it should be had over some tea.”

“A moment then, let me call my friends, and I will follow you. It would be very rude of them to try and call me after I am partaking of your hospitality after all,” Rias answered, her politeness winning her a small smile from the older man. With his nod, she turned aside, pulled out her phone and sent off a series of texts to Rika, Saeko and Ranma. The only one to answer instantly was Rika, though, following up on Rias’ warning that there were devils in the area with a, “Do you think they will cause us trouble, or are they just trouble in general?”

To this, Rias only replied with a shrug emoji. But she thought about it and about how Ranma seemed to attract trouble wherever he went, as well as the fact that she, a devil herself, was in another devil clan’s territory without their say-so. With all that in mind, she texted back, “I would err on the side of causing us trouble. If Ranma runs into any of the local devils without me there to try to keep him from mouthing off, or if they take my own prisons the wrong way, we could run into trouble.”

Although honestly, given the wards around this Temple, Rias felt that she personally would be safe as long as she was there. That might give her some time to think about how to contact the local devil clan and smooth things over. But until then, she had a mystery to solve, and when it looked like Rika wasn’t going to respond again, she followed the priest over the

ward line. Stepping where the man directed, she following him inside the temple, wincing very briefly at the feel of the place, having the same reaction most devils would have to walking into sanctified ground.

Rias did not notice the old man's eyes widening slightly and a brief smile appearing on his face as she passed under the threshold of the temple with only a tiny twitch of her lips to indicate any kind of pain or uncomfortableness. *I suppose that there are devils, and then there are devils. Fascinating.*

"So, tell me what you are here to search for, and I will tell you if my family or this temple owns it. We do not own much, so that would surprise me greatly." The brief smile on the old man's face widened as Rias made for the tea, waving him off when he tried to do the same, although a smile only had a little bit to do with that act. "And if you have truly found something of worth to bring you here in the first place, I may be willing to help if you tell me why and answer some of my own questions in turn."

"Then I believe we are both of similar mind," Rias smiled. "Just let me make us some tea, and we can start."

0000000

Rika looked over at Shizuka, who was sitting across from her at a small café they had stopped at. Rika had initially stopped in to talk with some of the local police, using her SAT authority to ask some questions about local crime. Beyond the wave of thefts, however, there was nothing really in the area, and she had explained away her concern as being part of any investigation against a JSDF runaway who had stolen a few guns from one of the army armories that the government was trying to keep on the down low for now. Even if the police she had spoken to shared that information with others, it wouldn't go anywhere.

"So, what do you think?"

"MMm... I think I won't have a second crumpet," Shizuoka said, shaking her head. "They are just a bit too plain for me."

"Not about the food, silly, about the message Rias sent us."

Shizuka pouted a bit, then shrugged, which always did interesting things considering the massive mammaries she sported and how little any kind of bra could do to control them. Although her response showed that despite her airhead exterior, Shizuka did occasionally show some flashes of intelligence outside her profession. "I don't know Rias or the devils well enough to know anything, really. But I think it would prepay to be prepared. And link up with Asia-chan, Ranma and Busujima-chan."

“That’s what I think too.” Rika looks down at the book bag she had set her feet frowning pensively. The bag was easier to move around the city with. A duffel long enough to carry some of her rifles would have garnered her some looks, even with Shizuka next to her.

I think the time for subtlety is going to end soon. “I’m gonna go get me some real guns,” Rika drawled.

Shizuka stared at her blankly, then shook her head slowly from side to side. “Was that supposed to be a Cowboy accent?”

“It was supposed to sound like that Young Guns character from the old Wild West movie we watched last night,” Rita said, pouting.

“Leave the accents to someone else love. Besides, I prefer Blazing Saddles myself,” Shizuoka deadpanned before hopping to her feet as Rika made to kick her under the table. “Now, come on, Annie Oakley, let’s go get your guns.”

Since this was accompanied by a kiss on the lips that didn’t just ignore the typical Japanese sense of decorum while in public but trampled it into the ground, Rika didn’t say anything for several moments as she allowed Shizuka to drag her to her feet and towards the cash register. It was only as they left the café and began their trek back to the hotel and the Humvee, which held her guns, that Rika finally found her voice again. “Who’s Annie Oakley?”

OOOOOOO

Pulled from a meeting by Gea’s report of having seen Asia Argento down at the beach, it had not taken Diodora very long to decide to try to take advantage of this serendipity. However, he was a cautious sort and had wondered **why** Argento was in the area, and with whom. Finding that out had taken an hour, but eventually, Diodora learned that Rias Gremory, along with several humans, one of whom he had a report about. Sona Sitri submitted a report to the Four Maou, as did, reluctantly, Serafall about the battle against Kokabiel and his legion. Both had made mention of Ranma, and how he had been able to fight Kokabiel, the leader of the attack, on an even footing.

That had made him very cautious indeed, and he had decided to not take part in the attempt to grab Asia Argento himself. Indeed, he had even held up that response, ordering his ladies to pull back, giving them a special set of instructions and making most of them dress up in different uniforms than the overly sexualized nun outfits he normally had them wear. That way it was highly unlikely that anyone would be able to link the attack to him. His two remaining peerage members would also be dressed in something different as long as they were in the human world.

Diodora had no idea how strong Ranma really was. A cautious young man, he did not want to fight him without a plan, particularly not with Rias Gremory nearby with her Power of Destruction.

Thus, instead of trying for a forceful grab or a subtle one through trying to woo Asia, he decided to play a long game until he had more information about what he was dealing with here. The report from Gea about how Ranma was fighting Copycat Ken, one of the Astaroth clan's clients, meant he had a ready source of information if he just waited to call upon it in the future. Unless Ranma killed him, in which case, accessing that information would become a good deal harder.

With that in mind, he gave one of his rooks, Augusti Alivero, the task of finding where Rias was and requesting a meeting with her. She was easily the most stoic of Diodora's peerage and also one of those whose loyalty to him did not need to be repeatedly enforced by fear. She was easily the least likely beyond Gea to try to warn Rias or give away any hints about Diodora's real character beyond the façade he kept up when dealing with other devils both within and without his clan.

As for the peerage members sent to try to capture Argento? Plausible deniability was a thing. If his pawns, his bishop, De le Fere, rook and queen were able to take Argento, good. If not, well, Diodora had recently learned of a pair of twin holy maidens in Turkey. Diodora was always the sort to want a new toy whenever he had the opportunity to get one, even if it meant letting his old ones be broken. As an Astaroth, Diodora could refill his peerage pieces far more easily than any devil who wasn't affiliated with their clan ever could. He felt it might be just about time to start abusing that privilege.

OOOOOOO

The fight had gone on for the better part of an hour before Ranma decided that she was done with her opponent. A final blow to the side of the temple sent Mousse-Ken reeling. The man had tried to once again gain some distance and use the various weapons that his deal with a devil had been able to give him to good effect but had failed miserably.

Ranma grinned as she saw her hand turn blue up to the upper arm even as Ken's entire head and chest became encased in ice. Although really, given the impetus of the blow, that was more insult than added injury. The man was already unconscious as he was flung through the air to crash side down into the sand.

He stepped back, grinning cheerfully at the bruised, shattered and now frozen body of Copycat Ken, before reaching down, smacking the ice hard enough over the man's face to shatter it, so he didn't die of asphyxiation. The ice now covered his neck and chest area, while below that, much of Copycat Ken's clothing had been turned green, the green somehow shifting colors with his transformation, always becoming apparent from one form to another in a different way. His leg had once been turned into a Minotaur's hoof, although that

transfiguration hadn't lasted very long. Bits and pit pieces of ribbon, duct tape, feathers and other things littered the area, summoned into being by the chaos magic Ranma had been using on the guy, and Ranma knew for a fact that one of the spells had turned the bones in the older man's arm into rubber. It had been that which had actually caused Ranma to realize that her guinea pig was coming close to its expiration date, and she better stop playing with it.

A thought occurred to her then, and Ranma frowned pensively, cocking her head thoughtfully as she stared at the beaten, broken body of her opponent, then her own fists thoughtfully. "Huh, am I becoming a sadist? Is Saeko rubbing off on me?" she thought about it for a few moments, then shrugged. "Nah. I didn't do anything too permanent to him after all."

Ranma's lips quirked then as she looked down at a series of strange images wrought on the side of Copycat Ken's body, visible through perfectly cut holes in his shirt. "Well, except for that permanent marker stuff."

That particular spell had hit Copycat Ken and burned through his clothing like brands, only to cause him no actual pain when it came to his skin, instead leaving behind what looked like a child's wild scrawl in permanent marker. The sight of that had actually caused even Ranma to stop for a second, but that had been the only time she had. Ranma's ability to adapt to crazy stuff as it occurred had given her a major advantage, although most of her experimentation with giving each chaos magic even a little bit of direction hadn't really worked.

There was always some kind of random blowback. The harder Ranma tried to control the chaos magic, the worse the blowback. At one point, Ranma's entire arm had been set on fire while Copycat Ken's eyebrows had been turned to ash within a second, causing him some pain but not a lot and Ranma a moment of panic. Chaos magic did **not** want to be contained in any way, shape or form.

But that was all right by Ranma. She had learned quite a bit and was quite happy with her experiment. Now, she pondered what to do with Ken. This wasn't Nerima, where she could just shake the man down or drag him back to each place he'd stolen from and point out his abilities and everything else and demand that he make good what he stole. Knowing the local shop owner would have some way to keep Ken from running away. Nor would this area have any superstrong jail cells up to containing a martial artist even of Copycat Ken's original skill level, let alone his new devil deal-driven abilities.

Looking around, Ranma realized that the fight had taken them along the beach and then out into a reserved area of some kind. Whoever had reserved it wasn't here at the moment, which was a good thing, but Ranma figured that it would do as a place to just leave Ken. With a battering she had given him, the middle-aged man would be out of it for a good long while, especially given how the bones in his arm had been turned into so much rubber.

Thinking about it now as she walked away, Ranma was actually quite grateful that whatever had been done to the guy's bones at least hadn't hurt him much. At the time, Ken had

been far more concerned about why his arm was flopping around like a wet noodle and hadn't been in any extra pain from it. "Weird. But still fun," Ranma reflected, looking around and trying to get her bearings before remembering that she had been given a cell phone by Rias that had GPS on it. And that it, in turn, tracked Asia, too. It was only as she pulled out his phone that Ranma realized that she had missed some calls. Looking at the text message Rias had sent as well, Ranma frowned suddenly.

Unlike Rias, who might have forgotten, Ranma well remembered how a group of devils had tried to take Asia while they were in Nerima. *If the locals are anything like them, they might be after Asia right now!*

With that, he quickly found Asia's location via the GPS and, after a few moments of fiddling around with it, figured out where they were in relation to one another. Without a second glance at his former opponent, he ran off in that direction, sudden worry filling him.

OOOOOOO

Mousse had retreated from the beach after a bit of sunbathing, Asia having admitted that she didn't really particularly like just laying out in the sun like that and further admitting in a whisper that she burned easily as if it was some great terrible secret. Instead, the three of them had explored the boardwalk, where they found a small ice cream parlor. They sat outside of the parlor now, with the duck taking very small bites of the ice cream, then wincing and shivering as it held its head up, quacking in pain occasionally from the brain freeze.

"If it bothers you in that form, you could just transform back into your normal body, you know," Saeko intoned drolly.

"Quack," Mousse began, explaining that if they were in Nerima, he probably would. But as it was, he had begun to eat the ice cream as a duck, and there were people nearby taking pictures. It would not do for the duck to suddenly disappear and for a strange man to come along and join them, taking the duck's ice cream for his own. Ranma's bit of theater had already done enough to draw attention.

As he spoke, Mousse shifted to look over his shoulder at Asia, who'd already finished her own vanilla ice cream and was now sitting there smiling pleasantly as she watched the beachgoers, one hand stroking Mousse's back. That was very, very nice. Somehow, the younger girl knew precisely how much pressure to put into her pats and just the right way to stroke his feathers.

This, this was very nice. Mousse was not used to being treated so well, particularly by women. Shampoo had never given him ice cream or indeed, any kind of food unless they were eating at the restaurant, where he was simply another customer. Most of the time when he was in duck form, she would give him duck food. Or, if he was in his duck form due to a battle against Ranma, Shampoo would keep him on a chain in the kitchen.

But that is what you deserve, right? You lost. You had to be punished for it. That was what Shampoo was doing, like a loving wife, making certain the lesson stuck, right? Only... why does it no longer seem like that? No, stop it! Stop it. You are loyal to Shampoo! Mousse thought, shaking his head. *Yes, yes, once we return to Kuoh, I can restart my bid to win Shampoo's affection. I have watched Ranma a lot and can easily devise a plan to beat him, to prove my worth to her. Heck, given his relationship with Saeko and Rias, I doubt he will go all out. Once that is done, I can start truly wooing Shampoo!*

Yet even as he dove down into the ice cream again, a thought came to him, cutting across his dreams of the future. *But isn't loyalty supposed to be a two-way street? And what about that look she gave you when Cologne was questioning the two of you? That certainly wasn't the look of a loving wife or even a friend, was it?*

Naturally, as such thoughts occurred to them, Mousse shook them off. But this time, it was far harder than it ever had been before as he watched Asia smile down at him, as he remembered how Akeno had flirted with him occasionally, despite their initial meeting having gone so horribly for him. And, a far more... visceral part of his mind also remembered how Shampoo always hit him or shoved him away whenever he tried to give her any kind of affection. This was a stark contrast to how Akeno had held him in duck form against her magnificent chest without a care in the world several times during their trip to the beach.

While Mousse was perhaps taking the first step down the road to an existential crisis, Saeko frowned, suddenly grateful that they had changed back into their normal clothing and she once more had access to her limited ki space. "Something is off."

Mousse frowned as he looked up from his ice cream again, flopping from where he had been sitting in Asia's lap up to sit on the back of the bench, looking around them. Neither could explain it, but they could feel as if danger was coming their way. Then, a second later, Mousse realized something. "Quack?"

"The people, right. There aren't nearly as many people around as there were when we first sat down. I didn't realize it at first, but..." Saeko began before she was cut off as the few people still within sight suddenly disappeared. Asia was the only one who had any kind of magical sense among the trio, one that she had felt before. "We're in a dimensional bubble! Someone's raised it all around us."

Mousse frowned, having only a modicum of understanding of what that meant, whereas Saeko scowled and flipped out her sword, gently standing in front of Asia and pushing her against the wall behind them. Against a lot of magic users, that wall would not be any real defense, but it would do for a start. "Mousse, you better have some way of transforming..."

Mousse scoffed at that, a very odd sound coming from a duck, just as several individuals arrived.

They were all women. That threw Saeko at first, as she had simply assumed it would be a man after Asia. Instead, it was a group of twelve women, broken up into groups of four, coming at Saeko Asia and Mousse from three directions. This included over the rooftops, proving, if any more proof had been needed, that they were not normal people.

Saeko examined them closely. One, a middle-aged woman, had what she would call Slavic features, long brown hair, a severe face, deep-set brown eyes, and thin lips now turned up in a sneer. She wielded a sword, a Cossack saber, a little longer and just a little bit more curved than most that Saeko had seen in a documentary about the famous Russian cavalymen. There was also the fact that she wore a fur hat with a symbol of the USSR as what looked like a World War II Russian military officer's uniform. That was a big clue.

She led a group of three younger girls around Saeko's age or perhaps younger. All three wielded spears of various types, ranging from a simple stabbing spear to a guan do. None of the weapons looked all that intimidating, but Saeko wondered if they had some kind of magic to them. The girls did not look in any way related, differing in build, hair color and so forth, yet the way they stood indicated they had some training, although nowhere near as much as the Slavic woman.

And...all of them were dressed in fetishized nun's outfits. Black, skin tight, made of rubber mostly, with white used in the frocks. Oh, and the skirts were so short the fact they had very tiny panties was very obvious with each step they took.

Diodora's orders had actually bit him in the rear a little bit on this score. The group sent to back up Gea had been in a hurry to get there as fast as possible before they had been ordered to stop and buy new outfits. So there was little time for all of them to get outfits, and, well, despite the fact that most of them had been sexually abused for years, they were all still women, and shopping was never quick. So three of the pawns had all opted out of shopping, letting the others move quicker. And if this was a bit of rebellion, none of the other women commented.

Strange as the Russian military officer and the coterie of fetish nuns was, though, one of the women coming from the direct opposite direction was even stranger. Because as she strode forward, she tossed a long coat aside, revealing her nearly naked body. Only two patsies covered her nipples, and a similarly skintight pair of panties covered her womanly parts. That startled a bloody nose from Mousse and a gasp of shock and blush from Asia, but as they watched, her entire body suddenly turned into steel. Not like a suit of armor had suddenly appeared around her, no, rather in the way that her entire skin had turned into steel, like some of those strange mutant characters in American comic books that Saeko had seen occasionally being passed around at the school. Even her hair turned into steel, and she slammed her fists together, making a loud clanging noise.

Similar to the first real combatant, as Saeko was beginning to think of them, this one was followed by three others. Two were obviously twins around the same age as Asia, with light blue

hair done up in ponytails and wearing long skirted versions of light yellow and dark blue. Magic crackled around one arm each, lightning spells if Saeko was any judge, while their companion was a taller, more well-built woman of college age or thereabouts. She looked like a swimmer almost, with the same upper body strength and lean form as a swimmer or martial artist, and she wielded a shield and arming sword, with small yellow gems embedded in both the shield and the cross guard of the arming sword. As the other two fell back, she moved to stand beside the steel woman, staring expectantly toward Saeko, Asia and the duck.

Her brows furrowed in confusion for a moment, causing Saeko to glance down for just a second. At her feet, Mousse had pulled out what looked like a thermos and was quietly unscrewing it.

From over the rooftops came another older girl, maybe in her late twenties or so instead of middle-aged like the Russian woman. Her hair looked like it was silver at first, but it wasn't a pure kind of silver. Rather, it had some strange brownish highlights here and there. Yet more importantly, she had a vivid green aura up around her, crackling off of her shoulders and hair as she leaped down to face the trio, her lips twisted into a sneer as a fireball appeared in her hand, reflecting light up into her slightly yellowish eyes. Her face was just a bit too angular to be called attractive in Saeko's opinion, her chin coming to an aggressive point, the look in her eyes a little too jaundiced, a little too dismissive. Her outfit was that of a businesswoman, although without the tie or company and jacket, just the undershirt and formfitting pants.

In comparison, the two women who had leaped down from the rooftops with her were almost plain, although they were also dressed like two nuns who had gotten their outfits from a S&M shop. One had flaming red hair, reminding Saeko of Ranma a bit. The other had a more normal brown color. Both of them wielded guns, guns that looked like the ones in that Young Guns movie Shizuka and Rika had been watching when Saeko, Rias and Asia had gone out on their date the night before.

Saeko deemed the two of them very little threat in comparison to the woman they were accompanying, or the fourth member of that little attack group, who stayed behind on the rooftop, holding her hands out to either side. Black hair flew in the breeze, as did the woman's traditional miko clothing, while air began to visibly coalesce to either side of her, taking the form of several long, spinning saws of air pressure. *My word, she looks like a bargain bin Akeno.*

While Saeko wasn't as close to Akeno as she was to Rias, she knew the Himejima girl was a gorgeous woman with a body men would kill to look at. This woman? She had the same hair, the same outfit, and even her eyes were the same violet color. Nevertheless, despite the haughty look on her face, the woman had a more boyish body than a womanly one. *She is a bit taller than me, I think, but has the same curves as Koneko. Sad.*

"Oh my, oh my, I am going to have to add prayers to my nightly regimen for even seeing this," Asia mumbled, trying hard not to let the blush on her face get in the way of her taking in what was happening. The very idea of someone taking the habit of a nun and turning it into

something like she was seeing now horrified and embarrassed her in equal measure. Yet now was not the time to get distracted.

“You are outnumbered twelve to one, whoever you are. We are here for the former holy maiden Argento. Let us take her, and you will not be harmed.”

Gea had known the instant that Diodora had told her that the others had all been ordered to change their clothing that this mission had been deemed somewhat expendable for some reason. What reason that was unclear to her, but Gea couldn't change that, nor could she back away from the mission as a whole. Diodora would have punished them severely for that. No, it was best to go forward with the plan and bring it to a close quickly and efficiently, which meant giving Saeko a chance to back away so they could simply take Argento instead of fighting for her. Given that Saeko was a complete unknown to her that seems the most logical conclusion to Gea.

“I think not.” Saeko flicked her blade out of her ki space, and as she did, the devils around them backed away, hissing. The sword was one of the ones they had taken from the exorcists, a blade that had been blessed by the Church in some fashion, to give it Light Magic abilities. To Saeko, it felt somewhat like an arming sword in length and weight, but the actual blade was made of Light Magic, like the spears of the fallen she had fought in Kuoh. Moreover, that would make it deadly to any low-level Devil. “If you wish to take Asia, you will have to come and get her.”

“Hah, you think you can fight us all!” the Russian-looking woman scoffed, the first to overcome her chagrin at Saeko's choice of weapon. “You are as outnumbered as her countrymen were when you faced the great Zhukov in the Russo-Japanese War. That blade is not enough to offset your advantage, as then your striking first was not.”

There was a faint sound of steaming water being poured, and Mousse pushed himself to his feet from where he had been sitting on his rear in his duck form a moment ago, crossing his hands in front of him, his hands disappearing into his sleeves. A smirk on his face, Mousse stared all around them, once more fighting back a full grin at how amazing it was to be able to see the world without the need for his massive coke-bottle glasses any longer.

“I think I would like a word with your oddsmaker. It is twelve against two.” He flung his hand up, and suddenly, a large porcelain sink flew, crashing into one of the spear-wielding fetish nuns before she could dodge. She was hurled backward, rolling along the boardwalk for a few moments before coming to a still, unconscious. “Eleven to two nowWWW!”

That was as far as he got before the attackers charged forward, spreading out as they came. The woman who had been cupping fire in her hand and who seemingly was a spokeswoman for this group hurled it forward, forcing Mousse to bat it aside with the thermos he had used to turn into his human form. The thermos was incinerated but caused the fireball to detonate prematurely rather than continue on its course.

The businesswoman was then forced to dodge a flung spear from Mousse as Saeko charged toward the two beside the fire wielder, launching a condensed airwave attack. This intercepted the incoming air saws from the woman who remained on the rooftops above. The two shooters fired at her, but Saeko cut their bullets in half without even slowing.

Beside her, Asia raised, knowing she had to stick close to Saeko and hoping that her clumsiness didn't rear its ugly head at the worst possible time. *Oh, Holy Father, please grant me at least a few hours without tripping!*

The rest of the attackers closed in around them, but Mousse tangled up the metal-form woman and her group with a large weighted net their way. It didn't slow them down much, but it didn't tangle them up, forcing them to get in one another's way.

Meanwhile, Saeko dodged another fireball from the woman, who backed away rapidly before charging forward suddenly, trying to take Saeko by surprise as she lashed out with a boxing punch.

Saeko dodged by the skin of her teeth, bringing the pommel of her sword up into the woman's stomach, sending her stumbling but apparently not doing any real damage. The next instant, Saeko twisted away, bringing her sword around to cut a fourth bullet in half from one of the two women who had backed away rapidly. The next second, her return strike came, slicing through another bullet as she closed. Before the younger woman could get away, a kick caught her, sending her flying backward. *Thank goodness, they're not using anything more modern than those old six-shooters, or this would be a much tougher fight.*

The next second, Saeko was sent sprawling as a blow caught her shoulder, and two more bullets slammed into her chest and stomach. That nearly had her on her knees, but she turned it into a forward roll, then brought her sword around in an economical cut thrust, cut, triple thrust combo that forced the Russian woman who had just reached her back, her cavalry saber desperately parrying the longer longsword that Saeko was currently wielding. The two spear-wielders with her tried to get past to grab at Asia, but Asia ducked around them then, surprising both women, she tossed a small pepper spray bottle at them, causing both young girls to howl in pain as they dropped their weapons.

"Freaking pawns! Good for nothing but slating the master's lusts, the lot of them!" a new voice barked, forcing Saeko to twist around, pushing Asia away.

The woman wielding a sword and shield combo had ducked over to the side just in time to avoid Mousse's thrown net and now joined the Russian in trying to get past Saeko's defenses, while the woman with the fireballs coated her hands in fire, lashing out in a series of punches, showing a certain amount of mastery with boxing, but she didn't have the speed quite close with Saeko. Light sword and one-handed longsword met several times, the two of them straining, the woman using her buckler extremely well to defend against Saeko's greater striking speed.

Nearby, Mousse stood in a corner between two buildings, shielding Asia from several more attackers. One of the other spear wielders was down, joined there a second later by one of the gun wielders, a throne dagger to the shoulder sending her to the ground with a scream.

An explosion sent all of the attackers every which way as the magic user on the rooftop above decided to get a little indiscriminate with her spells, finishing off the gunwoman. Asia was flung one way, with Saeko and Mousse in two other ways, separating them, all three battered far more than their opponents did by that attack.

“Excellent job! Grab Argento!” the flame wielder shouted as she sent forth a far larger fireball, the only one of the group that hadn’t been moved by the blast of arcane-enhanced wind a moment ago.

Hearing that, Saeko panicked, dodging around the Russian woman and charging towards the two lightning magic users who had obeyed instantly, pushing to their feet and racing towards where Asia had landed, groaning and muttering ‘owwie’ under her breath.

Saeko couldn’t duck the bullets coming her way. One of them took her in the knee, sending her sprawling.

Mousse was too busy to help. The steel-clad woman had torn her way out of the net and had closed, while he was still recovering from his bad landing from the explosion a moment ago. He watched as his weapons simply broke on her steel body, then ducked under a blow that would probably have felt like one of Ryoga or Lime’s if it had landed. He hit her with a baby’s toilet, then a Warhammer, then of series of bokken, but she smashed through it all, punching out hard again, forcing Mousse to dodge.

Unfortunately for Diodora’s peerage, they’d made a mistake. Concerned that Asia might be able to run away from any initial attempt to capture her, they’d made the bubble a little too big, and their spells to keep people away for a bit to put it in place were all built on the idea that the people they were trying to push away wouldn’t know what magic was. Rika, however, had dealt with this kind of thing before, first in the form of the house in Kuoh the exorcists under Father Galilei had been hiding in prior to the assault, then the massive battle that followed, which also occurred in a dimensional bubble. Rika knew when she was being turned around by something and had basically been around the area, pushing herself towards it through sheer willpower.

Now, set up on top of a miniature golf place’s faux lighthouse, Rika made her presence known. A bullet slammed into the side of one of the pawns, going straight through to hit the ground, exploding her head like a watermelon. Another shot slammed into the Russian woman, causing her to curse, although it hadn’t done more than break a rib on the woman, who was one of Diodora’s Knights.

The Bishop, who had been using air spells a moment ago, could not say the same. Even as she tried to turn to find out where the fire was coming from, she staggered two shots hammering into her head and stomach from Rika's sniper rifle. Her corpse fell down towards the ground below, landing in front of the last of the two gun wielders, who paled visibly.

Snarling, Gea turned away from where she had been about to finish Saeko off, fireballs sent racing towards the distant shooter instead. "Damn you!"

Thankfully, Rika was so far away that she had time to jump clear before they slammed into the faux lighthouse, turning it into so much ash and debris. Landing in the eighteenth hole, she rolled as she struck, grunting as a rock caught her in the ear before pushing herself to her feet.

Saeko proved far more resilient than any of the attackers would've given credit for, pushing herself to her feet, grimacing somewhat. "I'm going to have to give Ranma something very, **very** nice for forcing me through that toughness training." *I am going to be so sore, though!* Saeko thought as she charged forward, ducking under a spinning whirlwind of fire, then dodging to the side as the fire wielder crafted another spell, this time a fire whip.

The magic of her light blade cut through the fire, nearly cutting off the woman's fingers. Whatever durability devils might have against most weapons, light-blessed ones simply took all of that durability away instantly.

Desperately, she fell back, putting one of the other fighters between them, the last gun wielders.

That worthy barely had time to turn away from the corpse of the air magic user, before Saeko was on her. The next second, the flat of Saeko's blade cracked into the gun, sending it sideways, before her sword came up in a quick, economical slice, cutting at a diagonal across the girl's chest and ending in her throat, before Saeko was twirling around, her sword slicing into and getting caught onto the gun of the second gun wielder.

Mousse, meanwhile had, through the use of a barrage of different types of weaponry, sent the metal form woman and two of her fellows backward, while Rika charged towards them. Her sniper rifle discarded, she held two of the purloined light-blessed exorcist guns in her hands. Firing them one after another, she charged into the fray.

The buckler user tried to block some of the strikes, but one of them took her in the knee, dropping her to her face as she screamed, while both remaining spear wielders fell.

Gea grimaced, knowing this battle was turning against them now. A gun wielder and that strange male fighter have turned this into a fucking debacle! And then, just to add to her worry, the dimensional bubble shattered as something powerful hit it. This dumped everyone back into the real world, and while the immediate area was still empty thanks to Gea spellwork earlier,

there were still lots of beach goes elsewhere, who suddenly became aware of the violence going on nearby.

That was the final draw. Whatever punishment Diodora would give them was better than the alternative. "Retreat! Fall back towards the ocean!"

Not a single pawn replied, all of them had been killed, mostly by Rika's sudden arrival, along with the bishop that had been using wind attacks a moment ago. Light blessed weapons were truly deadly against low-to-mid level devils.

As Gea pulled away from Saeko, to retreat away from the charging Rika or the embattled Mousse, this allowed Saeko in turn to turn her full attention against the saber wielder. By the time Gea reached the sand, having jumped a considerable distance from the boardwalk to almost the point where waves crashed down and ignoring the dozens, perhaps as many as a hundred people, who were watching whatever was going on in shock or confusion, the Slavic woman first lost her hand to Saeko's blade, then her neck was opened up in a quick economical back strike.

The steel clad woman however was able to reach Gea's side, and she twisted around, slamming a massive fireball down into the waves behind them. Steam billowed out in every direction, causing the dozens of onlookers to scream in shock or in pain she didn't care which as she raced away under the cover of the steam, her fellow peerage member shifting into her normal body to run alongside her despite this leaving her nearly naked.

This had been a disaster from the get-go, and had left a mess behind that Rias and the local devils would need to cooperate and to clear up. But right now, all that mattered to either woman was getting away. Punishment for their failure would come later.

End Chapter