

Here's the second chapter of this work. It doesn't cover as much time as I wanted, but I figure the place I end this chapter makes a lot of sense and will let me skip a repeat of events. I can even use it to put in a small-time skip, covering the next few weeks until Ranma and Kasumi can speak for themselves and Ranma's convinced Kasumi to go on a dungeon dive, or let him do so, anyway.

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

Chapter 2: Dungeon Delving in Reverse

While Ranma moved to each of the entrances and made certain that no more monsters were coming their way, the ROGS moved around the open area finishing off any that still twitched. Angelica, Kasumi and a few of the others saw to those who had been more injured. In doing so, Angelica found another reason to snarl at her followers, but kept it to a single plaintive, "What do you mean you didn't pack any supplies?"

The shamefaced manner in which half of her coterie of acquaintances simultaneously looked away had Angelica closing her eyes and breathing deeply and counting to ten, one of the first anger management methods her father had taught her. *Much like he taught me to be prepared for anything, and the importance of having supplies in your expanded pouch when you go into a dungeon, but noooo, of course not making certain of that becomes another oversight on my part! So much for assuming competence!*

"Alright," Angelica snarled once she had gotten her temper under control. "What supplies does everyone have? Carmen, Ariel, I know you have expanded pouches like mine. Same for you, Timothy, and you, Elizaveta."

The four of them were all from Marquee families, and thus rich enough to afford the price of an expanded pouch. "I have my sleep roll, a few sleepless crystals, two mana potions, a firestarter crystal, some burn cream, painkillers, a whetstone, several meal packets, water gourds, thread, gauze and rubbing alcohol."

"Er, pretty much all of that except for the water, food and sleep roll, Lady Angelica," Timothy said, looking a little shamefaced, but trying to rebuild his image in the Rapha heiress' eyes. "So, that's, that's good, right?"

It wouldn't work. To Angelica, Timothy Fia Dargun would always be the boy who had fallen back and retreated to leave Angelica to face the horde of monsters on her own when he had taken a simple glancing blow, one barely enough to bruise. However, right now, he had supplies they needed. Unfortunately, he was also the only one who came close to matching her own preparedness from the foursome. All three of the girls she had named had food, sewing kits and mana potions but the rest of their emergency supplies was made up of...

"Clothing," Angelica deadpanned. "Really?"

"Er, and makeup supplies, toiletries, and... female necessities, Lady Angelica." Carmen shrugged as if that was all she needed to say.

Ariel was worse. "It's not like we knew we were going to get lost in a dungeon, Lady Angelica. We just added stuff we might need to use in exploring a few floors, nothing major, to the stuff we already carried."

"The point of having an adventurer's bag is to use it to be prepared to go on adventures, which rarely come at you in a controllable manner," Angelica said, her tone the one someone would use to talk to a dullard, before she sighed. "Very well. That means however, your bags are mostly empty. Any clothing you have can be used for bandages and slings. Does anyone else have any supplies they can share with the group?"

It turned out that the others did. Many of them who couldn't afford expanded pouches, large purse-like bags that an adventurer could carry on their belts or as a backpack, did have some supplies. Michelo and Gregar, the two boys who had been acting as scouts, had remained where they were on the small ledge that remained jutting out of the hallway that marked the way to the floor above. But they shouted down, they had bedrolls, more painkillers than Angelica, but no food to go with water, flint, tinder and a whetstone. They also carried several energy crystals for their guns, and Angelica showed her approval with a shout of "well done" sent their way.

Others had water... or something stronger, which caused Angelica to scowl, flint, rubbing alcohol and other things of that nature. All of which was useful in helping them deal with their various injuries.

Better, though, was Kasumi's response to Angelica organizing their supplies. She first spoke to Ranma, a mutter of, "///My word, it looks like your ki space isn't going to be so surprising to these folk, Ranma,///" before she moved forward, holding out a resolute hand for the gauze the heir to the earldom of Glengale had just pulled from a sack on his belt.

"Kasumi?" Angelica was confused, but she watched as Kasumi plucked the gauze roll out of the boy's hand, then turned to one of the wounded, urging them with hand gestures to stay where they were. She then began to roll up his shredded sleeve, apply some of the rubbing alcohol and rather expertly wrap the long gash there.

"Is, is she some kind of nurse?" Ariel mumbled, frowning and wincing a bit as she touched her thigh. "Um, should we all take some painkillers, do you think?"

Despite wanting to growl at the girl who had called herself one of Angelica's friends only to flee at the first opportunity, Angelica nodded. "Pass them around. They probably won't do much for pulled muscles or bruises that cut into our ability to move, but they should let us deal

with the pain of our wounds to a certain degree. But do it on the move. I want us to get away from here before more monsters come.”

Angelica, feeling a bruise starting to appear on her side and her neck, collarbone and right shoulder starting to twinge in pain, followed her own advice with a grimace, reaching into her bag of holding with a mutter of, “Water 1” under her breath, the necessary verbal mnemonic to bring out the required item. Her pouch was one of the more expensive versions out there, a real bag of holding, and was linked to her voice, meaning she didn’t need to search for the item or open up and look inside the pouch.

As she took out the various herbs that, when mixed with water, helped with pain, Angelica looked around her at the makeshift group. Ranma had been watching Timothy and Elizaveta pull items out of their expanded pouch, but now had leaped up to the remains of the entryway to the floor above, joining the scouts there. The stairs leading up had been smashed by the giant earth golem, and he quickly began creating what looked like a makeshift rope ladder, complete with bits of ant chitin to step on. Soon, he was calling out to the rest of the group below, gesturing to them to get a move on.

Meanwhile, Kasumi and a morose-looking Carmen were moving among the others, seeing to their wounds, the difference in their abilities obvious.

Her eyes flicking from one of the wounded to another, Angelica was relieved to see that none were serious. Only two men looked as if they had taken wounds to their legs, one had a broken arm, and another had a very visibly swollen wrist, speaking of some other kind of injury, but mostly what everyone had were cuts and bruises. Thanks to Ranma’s planning, even those would be able to make it to the next floor safely, if not under their own power.

Of course, given the fact that four of us were crushed when the golem smashed the staircase, and we had already lost two of our fellows, our luck seems to be very much in flux, Angelica mused grimly as she waited her turn at the ladder, her eyes caught by a foot sticking out from under the rubble nearby. Then her expression firmed, and she turned away, climbing up the ladder easily. *Yet those four would not have been there at all had they not broken and run like cowards!*

While Angelica was ecstatic to still be alive and thankful for their sudden rescue, she could not get over how her followers had basically fallen apart during what amounted to their first adventure. Holfort was built on the backs of adventurers to the point where many of the most powerful families had been founded by adventurers, including her own, the royal family and the other two ducal houses. In fact, off the top of Angelica’s head, she could only think of three noble families who couldn’t trace their lineage back to successful adventurers. Or at least someone who had achieved grand military accomplishments by their ancestors.

To see the children of her house’s political faction coming apart like this had been appalling.

And that is not even considering the personal side of things, Angelica thought, trying and failing to push aside a flash of true hurt and a feeling of betrayal that went through her as the group started to move down the new tunnel. Her eyes stared into their backs as they went, narrow and furious. These people are, they have been acting as my, my friends and acquaintances, people that I, I have been in contact with for years. Not just followers whose families are allied with my own and thus form my future power bloc, but friends I thought I could count on going forward.

Yet, when push came to shove, they all had put their own personal safety ahead of every other consideration, a type of mindset that Angelica hated to see in anyone, let alone nobles whose blood should have meant they stood for something better, should have been better. *If they are willing to just run away, to leave me, can I truly trust them at all going forward to watch my back in any way, even ways that do not involve physical danger? Those who quail from physical threats may quail at moral challenges, too.*

Angelica's gaze had turned sharp as she thought of the battle that had just occurred, as Angelica could not find it in herself to remember they were all young and inexperienced, all on their first adventure, an undertaking which had become far, far more serious than any of the group had ever feared it could, as she glared at her companions. She didn't want to recall that four of her followers had already paid the ultimate price for breaking from the group and her plans of mutual self-defense. All Angelica could think about, was how close she had come to death thanks to their cowardice and self-interest.

A gentle hand on her shoulder broke Angelica out of her thoughts, and she looked up to find Kasumi standing in front of her, having moved through the group to join Angelica near the back. *"//I can tell from that look in your eyes that your mind is going in circles, which is never a good thing. Right now, we need everyone's eyes open at all times.//"*

The commiserating, concerned look did more than the unknown words to help Angelica regain her mental equilibrium, as did the realization they had moved along the tunnel far enough to leave the broken balcony out of sight behind them. *I was that out of it?* Angelica realized, shaking her head at having been so lost in her thoughts that she hadn't been aware of her surroundings. *Good grief, Father and Gilbert would both remonstrate with me most harshly for that. I, I suppose I'm not dealing with this whole experience as well as I had thought, either. I need to remember that when dealing with my followers, I suppose.*

With a wry twist to her lips, Angelica nodded her head, then added, "I'm sorry, you're right. I should be paying more attention to our surroundings. I'll do better in the future."

While Kasumi similarly didn't understand the words, the tone carried over, and she nodded, bestowing another smile on Angelica. She then gestured to an area underneath one of the dungeon lights. Looking where Kasumi was pointing, Angelica saw a series of holes that looked as if they had been hit by something larger, an imprint of a fist in the stone. Kasumi then

made a motion as if to indicate something might've come out of the hole, then made a gesture to her eyes again and all around them.

"Right. Even more than monsters, we need to be aware of traps," Angelica agreed, turning her attention to her loose group of hangers-on. Never again would she call any of them anything better than acquaintances, except perhaps the two scouts, who were not in sight at present. "Be warned, everyone, keep an eye out for anything unusual in the walls, ceiling, or floor. With how many traps we've seen so far, we can't be certain that Ranma and the scouts will have been able to deactivate all of them."

"What in the world is up with that anyway? This dungeon wasn't supposed to be one of those that specializes in traps. Even setting that aside, the numbers and strength of the monsters here is far too high!" Ariel complained.

Angelica had her own theories about why this particular dungeon had been mislabeled and would bring them up with her father when they returned. At present, she had no doubt that, with Kasumi and Ranma's help, that would happen. It was just a matter of time. However, right now, Angelica understood human nature enough to understand that if she told Ariel, Carmen and that their current dire straits were a direct result of someone attempting to kill her, it would not go over well. "I don't know. But I will be having a severe word with the local Adventurers Guild. But for now..."

Her hand glowed with fire, and she hurled a tiny, thin dagger of flame behind her followers who had all turned to look at her. Her target was a portion of the wall where the tunnel curved, and the fire dart flashed right over Ariel's shoulder. As the girl yelped, a shadow there screamed, the small fireball having struck the shadow monster that had been coalescing there. A second later, as everyone watched, it fell to the tunnel floor and dissolved. "Keep your eyes open, all of you."

The six nobles in front of Angelica and the two behind her all flinched, but obeyed, while Kasumi did a slow clap, and her summoned creatures shifted around her, pointing at the same point for a second before going back to watching the walls and behind them. Angelica bowed as if she were on stage towards Kasumi, causing her to let out a little giggle which in turn caused Angelica to smile.

Somehow, just by being there, Kasumi radiated a certain gentle aura that made this whole ordeal far more palatable, or perhaps simply pleasant than it had been before. *Which is to say nothing about having someone like Ranma doing what he can to clear the way for us with Gregar and Michelo. As happy as I am to have someone as level-headed and perceptive as Kasumi seems to be by my side, without Ranma and those summoned... are they monsters or constructs? Well, without them and Ranma, this journey would still be far more fraught.*

As they moved on, Angelica discreetly examined one of the summoned creatures, which had shifted position around Kasumi. There had been some talk between Kasumi and one of the

summoned creatures, the strange floating orb, which was nowhere in sight at present, back when Kasumi was helping with the wounded. If Angelica was missing her guess, it had gone forward with Ranma. Regardless, it had seemed to Angelica at the time that the orb was a chief summon of some kind.

In contrast, the small, dog-like mechanical creatures had not spread out to protect all the others, despite many complaints, whose tones at least should've come through. Instead, they stuck to their mistress, keeping an eye out in every direction and for any threat, up to and including Angelica and her followers. *Well, that is fine, I suppose, although given her seemingly gentle nature, I would have thought that Kasumi would order them to spread out and protect the whole group.*

Shrugging that thought off, Angelica made another few mental notes on the dog-like construct before turning her full attention to the tunnel around them. It was a wide one at present, wide enough for seven people to move side-by-side, but everyone was careful to keep a certain distance from the walls. It was lined with a dungeon light, the ubiquitous strange torches made by all dungeons in order to better lure in adventurers.

Why that was, no one truly knew, although it was known that dungeons ate those who fell in them, and anything that was brought inside too. The ambient magic of a dungeon broke down anything foreign, in return becoming stronger.

The hallway they were moving along continued for a time at a gentle curve, creating a large spiral pattern, if Angelica's sense of space was anything to go by, anyway. She wasn't certain it was here in a dungeon and lamented the fact that her group's compass had been destroyed in the ambush that had slain the two knights her father had sent to accompany her group into the dungeon. Thankfully, there weren't very many offshoots, all of which were short and with nothing there but the crushed, shattered or shot remains of monsters dealt with by the trio in the lead.

How long it had been since Kasumi had broken Angelica out of her mental fugue, she didn't know, but it was enough time for the painkilling herbs to wear off. As a result, Angelica became aware of aches and pains she had previously been able to ignore or had not in fact felt at all. It was not a pleasant feeling, and Angelica found her hand sneaking up to her neck and shoulder occasionally, then down to the thigh opposite, wincing when she discovered the bruise was actually a good bit larger than she had thought. There didn't seem to be an accompanying one on her shoulder or collarbone, thankfully but Angelica was equally certain that she had pulled something there.

She wasn't the only one, and soon, many of her fellows began to stumble, weariness, aches and pains getting to them. Kasumi saw this and clapped her hands gently, getting everyone's attention before gesturing to sit down, doing so herself. She then mimed that the others would be coming back eventually, but they should all wait and recover here.

"Ugh, can she really not understand us? This use of pantomime is so childish," Carmen grumbled. "I refuse to think that two adventurers as capable as these two seem to be would enter our nation without speaking our language or, at the very least, without some kind of language-translating magical item."

Angelica scoffed. "I have looked into both of their faces as I speak to both of them, and I have seen no sign of recognition there."

"Lady Angelica, I don't want to be rude, but could they have been sent to take advantage of this whole mess?" Carmen continued, not heeding the warning in Angelica's tone.

"That pushes the realm of possibility so far it isn't even funny. How could anyone know that we would trip that trap? How could anyone know where it would deposit us in the dungeon? Why would they send two people who don't speak our language to somehow inveigle themselves into our good graces?" Angelica counted points off on her fingers, her glare noticeably growing colder as she stared at Carmen and Ariel.

The others were simple followers and allies, simple acquaintances. I might eventually forgive them although I will never forget. These two, no, never. Not only had they shown themselves to be cowards, they hadn't even apologized for it up to this point, only attempting to blame the situation on the rest of their group back in the larger cavern, as if they hadn't fled just as quickly as any. "That is far too unbelievable."

Carmen subsided, although whether or not because she agreed with Angelica's points or at least understood them, or because her stomach had chosen that moment to rumble, Angelica didn't know. Regardless, she would take it, and as the others began to murmur quietly about being hungry and tired, she sighed and turned away.

For a moment, Angelica allowed her self-control to wane, and she slumped against the wall of the hallway, one hand moving up to gently touch her aching collarbone and shoulder, then around to the back of her neck. "Note to self, look for classes when I get to the Academy about how to properly take a fall, it is very clear that my training in such is lacking."

A second later, she blinked, her eyes opening as she felt someone touch her elbow. Turning, Angelica saw Kasumi had made her way to her side and cocked her head quizzically. The older girl, however, simply gestured to her own neck, then made strange, wiggling motions with her fingers.

Angelica stared at her, then shook her head, indicating she couldn't understand, and Kasumi chuckled, saying something in her own language for a moment. "///Drat it all, I wish we could communicate more. That would make everything here all so much easier. Still, I suppose that would be a little too fantasy-esque.//"

With a shrug, Kasumi gestured again to her own neck, then moved her hand up, twisting her neck slightly so that Angelica could see her kneading her muscles there for a moment, then gestured back to Angelica. Kasumi had seen one of the falls that Angelica had taken during the battle, and with no proper training or martial arts durability, that kind of thing could be nasty.

Watching Angelica bite her lip for a moment before hesitantly nodding and twisting around to present her back and shoulders to Kasumi, the oldest Tendo daughter moved into position behind the younger girl. Swiftly, her fingers went to work trying to knead out some of the sore and pulled muscles there. She quickly felt several dozen knots that would have locked up soon, making Angelica lose all ability to lift her arms above her head at the very least.

To say nothing about her back. Good grief, it looks as if Angelica never learned how to take a fall at all. That's not good, Kasumi reflected for a moment, her thought mirroring Angelica's earlier mumble to herself. *Even in Aikido, we learned how to take a fall or get knocked to the ground.*

Even as Kasumi did what she could to help, relying on similar massages she'd given over the years for her father, Akane, and even Nabiki when she pulled something, Kasumi's mind wandered for a few moments, trusting the ROGS to keep watch on both the dungeon and her new companions. Meeting Angelica, the so-called 'antagonist' of a decent chunk of Alto Liebe, had come as something of a shock, despite Kasumi and Ranma already operating under the assumption that they had indeed been transported into some kind of game world. But there was no sign of Olivia, the protagonist or the capture targets. The clothing of the youngsters around Kasumi didn't match the outfits they wore in the starter dungeon at the Academy either.

As a result, this event was either completely separate from what they had seen in the game or had occurred beforehand. A few of Angelica's followers, though, looked like characters who Kasumi had seen bully Olivia due to her status as a commoner and the academy's first scholarship student.

Angelica herself had never been shown getting involved, but the entire game, throughout the years spent at the Academy, had shown that she had to be the one ordering it. Moreover, whenever she was mentioned, Angelica was said to be close-minded, arrogant, venal, and ambitious, only wishing to be queen, with no lover in her heart for anyone, particularly the actual prince, whom she saw only as a means to an end.

Still, I don't see that now. Angelica is commanding, to be certain, demanding, certainly. But she didn't talk down to any of her followers as far as I can tell; she was more than willing to listen to Ranma and me, and she seemed open-minded at the very least. She even has something of a sense of humor, unless I miss my guess.

Angelica was two-dimensional in the game, Kasumi mused. Here, Kasumi could feel her muscles twitch, hear the girl grunt as she worked out a particularly large knot on the small of the other girl's back. *Here she is alive. They all are. Whatever else, we cannot allow ourselves to*

*fall into the trap of assuming that everything here is like in the game. This is too real, Angelica. The rest of them, they are **real people**. Even if some of this crowd act a little too full of themselves.*

After a little bit, Kasumi was finished and pulled her hands back from Angelica's back and neck, a thumbs-up sign to indicate she was finished. Angelica's brows furrowed at that signal, but she nodded, and seemed to thank Kasumi in Holfortian, before leaning sideways against the wall, taking what rest she could.

The moment of calm didn't last, and Angelica growled as the Viscount Ella Le'meret growled out, her face a rictus of pain. "You there, girl!" One of her arms was in a sling, but she was kneading her leg with her other hand and gesturing for Kasumi to come down to it. "Now that you are done with Lady Angelica, help me!"

"No, help me! I might still have to fight in the future, and my wrist is so sore I can barely move it," one of the 'men,' a term Angelica fought to use to describe any in her present company, said. The Viscount Calin Goa then lifted a forearm that looked, admittedly, quite swollen around the wrist area.

Kasumi simply stared back at them, cocking her head, as if she couldn't understand, but Angelica saw a twinkle in the girl's eyes. *No, she can't understand our language, but she can certainly tell from the tone and body language what they are about, a most observant young lady. And I would wager Kasumi is not one to go blithely along with those putting on airs they are unworthy of. Still, best to nip this in the bud.*

"And what exactly have either of you done lately to deserve having a massage?" she demanded archly, glaring at the two speakers. "Ella, you were among the first to break ranks, despite knowing your air magic would have helped my own fire magic to be far deadlier. And you, Calin, ran from the moment of contact when your shirt was cut. I do not want to hear demands from either of you towards Lady Kasumi."

Despite Angelica's defense of Kasumi's time, she could see that a lot of the others were interested in getting their aches and pulled muscles seen to. However, before any of the rest of them could speak up, Ranma came around the curve of the passage, followed by the two scouts.

Turning her attention away from the minor disagreement in front of her that her lack of immediate obedience had caused, Kasumi stood up, getting Ranma's attention. "Before you tell us what you all found, Ranma, that boy over there has a dislocated wrist. Could you help him with that? I wanted to earlier, but he refused to let me see to it back in the large cavern."

"Ha! More idiot him," Ranma snorted. "Still, that's easy to fix. Painful, especially after so long, it's been like two hours since the fight but easy."

"I know, but I think we need to remember all of these folk aren't, well, you; you are used to hardship and combat around every corner," Kasumi teased gently. "As for the others, that girl over there seems to be complaining about something with her hip, and two of the boys were having trouble keeping up with even our slow pace due to injuries to their feet. Do you have any kind of pressure points that would relieve the pain?"

"Er... there are a few pressure points that will deaden the pain in your limbs, but it won't do you any favors in terms of your body control, and you will definitely pay for it later. I thought I saw them all drinking herbs with water before?" Ranma asked, somewhat nonplussed. "Heh, healing herbs were a thing in the game, too, remember?"

"They don't have much of those, and Angelica gave them to the worst wounded, those with multiple broken bones. It also doesn't seem to last very long. Those herbs in the game ended up being a waste of money with the protagonist's powers, if you don't remember. Here, I think they are just pain killers instead of anything truly regenerative."

"Huh... Well, whatever, do you want me to do that now? We found the stairwell leadin' up, and I came back to see if we could get some magic-type help to clear out the cavern on the next floor. Heh, despite Phaeron's pouting at the very idea," Ranma smirked, showing the easy confidence that he had, Kasumi realized, been showing since they arrived in the dungeon.

That arrogance might get him in trouble someday, but his good humor is keeping my spirits up for now, so I won't comment, Kasumi thought wryly, as Phaeron stated he had not been pouting, merely despairing at the idea of relying on New Humans for anything. "Well, that might be a problem. I'm afraid even with the most wounded taking those painkilling herbs, the rest of these young folk are in too much pain to be very helpful going forward. Angelica's kept them under control for now, but depending on how far we have to go, that could fail quickly," Kasumi explained.

"Young folk, ha! It's not like you're that much older than us, Kasumi. Ya ain't the old maid of the Tendo family here," Ranma joked, shaking his head, missing how Kasumi flinched, then blinked, her eyes narrowing for a moment before her normal calm expression washed over her face again. "Or is this that maturity thing you like to harp on about?"

"...While I would hold my hand up and say that I am indeed more mature for my age than most, you also have to look at the other side of the equation; in that these folk, for the most part, seem to be too immature for their age," Kasumi drawled, taking a moment to answer.

Ranma laughed, having come to enjoy Kasumi's growing snarky side. Without another word, he moved over to the boy who had gone back to holding his wrist, glaring ineffectively at Kasumi. Someone glaring at Kasumi was so odd that Ranma had to stop himself from punching the guy, assuming he was some kind of alien monster for a moment. However, when he

gestured, the other youth held out his arm. Ranma looked at the wrist, then grabbed it with both hands, one behind the wrist, one on his hand.

Before the man or any of the others could stop him, Ranma wrenched the hand sideways, feeling the bone of the wrist clicking back into place. The man howled, falling back and grabbing at his wrist, but Ranma backed away, watching carefully. "Ya should be good now. The swelling will take a while to go down, but ya should be able to move it at least. I'd recommend some of those painkilling herbs, though."

After a few moments, the man grunted, moving his fingers and wrist again, shaking his head as he spoke in his own language. "//I don't know what that buffoon did or said just now, and it was painful as all hells, but it fixed my wrist, I can move it now. It still hurts, but at least my arms are useful again. I'm still in a great deal of pain, but at least my hand's usable.//"

Seeing that, Ranma nodded, then advanced on the girl who had apparently been complaining about her hip.

"//Wait, you said it hurt. You get away from me!//" Ella shouted, as Ranma advanced on her. She tried to conjure up a blade of wind, but Ranma simply ducked around it and jabbed her in the side, right above her hip with a finger. She yelped, then blinked, staring down at her leg. "//I, what the, my thigh, my hip, I can't feel any pain from either of them!//"

As a clamor arose from the others, shouting at Ranma to do the same to them and their injuries, regardless of their severity, Angelica frowned thoughtfully, tapping her chin with a finger and looking over at Kasumi. The older girl was watching this with what looked like a deadpan gaze. *If they weren't willing to use that... touch? Technique? It isn't magic for certain. Regardless of what it is, if they weren't willing to use it for the two boys who have broken ribs or Lianna with her shattered foot, then...*

Speaking loudly, Angelica tried to be heard over the clamor of her followers, which was not easy, as their voices echoed off the tunnel walls. "I would urge everyone to assume that there is a reason why neither of our new friends volunteered to do whatever that is before. There might be a downside to whatever odd technique or ability it is."

Unfortunately, as she had half expected, none of her followers were willing to listen, and Ranma spent several minutes going around, deadening limbs or pressing other pressure points to take away and alleviate the pain. Still, it was an irritated Ranma who didn't like the way most of them had demanded his help. The only one who had even thanked him was one of the scouts who had held up gestured to his elbow. At least he and the other scouts had some actual manners.

"//Well, now that everyone has had their injuries seen to, as best our companions have been able to//" Angelica's her voice caused Ranma to turn and look at her. "//Perhaps Ranma and our scouts could tell us what is awaiting us going forward?//"

He didn't understand what she said, but her fellows did at least.

“//Lady Angelica, we poked our heads up, but we think that it basically mirrors what we ran into a little bit ago from Lord Ranma and Lady Kasumi's perspective. The stairs lead up into another wider area, with other tunnels leading off it. Lord Ranma headed upwards, but whatever was there didn't follow him back down, which we think was his plan, at first,” one of the scouts, Michelo, reported. “Whatever is up there is waiting for us to ascend before doing anything.//”

While Michelo and Gregor spoke to Angelica, Ranma turned to Kasumi, wiggling fingers like Kasumi had done to Angelica before. “Do you need anything, Kasumi, or would you prefer a massage or something?” Ranma volunteered with a smirk. “I know you're not exactly used to all this exertion and everything.”

Blinking in surprise at that, Kasumi wondered why Ranma hadn't offered such before, but still shook her head. “Perhaps I would take you up on a foot massage at some point, Ranma, but anything else would be rather improper. I'm not Akane, after all, and you're not my fiancé.”

Ranma's eyes narrowed just a little bit, but he nodded before turning away. *She still can't be seriously thinking we're going to get home, can she? I mean, I could almost understand Kasumi hoping that everything would go back to normal if we could, but we're not.* Shaking that thought off, Ranma looked over to Angelica and the two scouts.

“Can you describe anything else unusual about the stairwell? Are there any traps? Does the makeup of the tunnel change?” Angelica questioned politely, allowing a smile to appear on her face for Michelo and Gregar.

The two of them had been the only two who had basically done whatever she had asked since her knights had been killed, and she did not blame them at all for the disaster that had been the fight in the open cavern. Both of them had already been at the top of the ledges leading to the next floor, and coming back down into the scrum would've been pointless for two marksmen like the pair of them. They'd stayed there and done what they could to provide covering fire rather than trying to run. The pair had retreated into the tunnel but had remained there, firing when the golem had swept the ledges away.

“There were several traps right at the start of the steps, but none on the actual steps, Lady Redgrave. Lord Ranma,” Gregar nodded his head towards Ranma, who was now watching them, “was able to deal with all of them. We spotted a few that he didn't see on the way to the stairs, but I think he learned from us what to look for better as we went. As for the actual makeup of the tunnel, it goes from mostly rock and dirt to larger stones and mortar.”

“Good, that might mean that we will be moving from the ant colony area into the realm of other monsters, which might mean we won't need to face such numbers going forward,” Angelica mused before looking over as Ranma held up a hand, waving it as if he were a student

trying to get a teacher's attention. She blinked at that, then chuckled, gesturing to herself and when Ranma nodded, made a 'get on with it' gesture.

Ranma smirked, having finished explaining the area above the stairwell to Kasumi. "Just wondering how big a fireball you can make, Red Eyes." *They really are red too, crimson almost. Really striking. Not to mention the re— stop that, Ranma! Just because you are away from Akane and her mighty hammer is no reason to perv on any girl you see. Especially since you know that this one is probably involved with that dickhead Julius. Even if she ain't a villain, that probably hasn't changed from the game to real life.*

Shaking that off, he mimed throwing something, pointing at Angelica, then to one of the nearby torches, before spreading his hands, as if trying to touch the sides of the tunnel. Angelica frowned thoughtfully, looking at the torch, then held up a hand, conjuring a fireball around her fingertips for a moment.

When Ranma nodded excitedly, pointed at it, and made the same expansive gesture, she understood. "//You want to know how big a fireball I can make?//"

Ranma nodded, then pointed down at the ground, where he began to draw something in the dirt of the tunnel. After a few moments, he had some kind of gelatinous ooze like thing there, and Angelica nodded. "//Slimes then? You want me to get rid of them all at once? Did you two see slimes?//"

"//Like Gregar reported, we didn't head up to the top of the stairwell, Lady Redgrave, Lord Ranma did. If he says he saw them, though, well, just judging by everything he's done so far, I believe him." Michelo glanced down at the drawing, then over at Ranma, before mimicking mandibles coming out of his mouth and then waving his arms wildly at several different angles before cocking his head quizzically.

"Okay, I know who I want on my team if we ever play charades for cash," Ranma muttered, causing Kasumi to giggle.

The giggle made Michelo glance her way, then away, as she smiled at him, and he blushed rosily. The older girl wasn't gorgeous. Lady Angelica was easily the best looking among the girls here, but whereas the other girls' expressions were all twisted in expressions of cold hauteur, anxiety, or arrogance, Kasumi didn't show any signs of those. Indeed, the gentle look in her expression was extremely striking.

"That response is most gratifying to see. That tells me that Plan A2.k might well be applicable," Phaeron muttered from above.

"What was that?" Kasumi hummed, as Ranma was made to answer Michelo's question with a nod. "Did you say something, Phaeron?"

“Nothing Mistress, just thinking about how much longer it will take me to build up a local language. I believe I now have a handle on their sentence structure, which is most like French with a spattering of Latin, but the actual words are still eluding me beyond a few whose meaning seems plain enough. Fire, water, injury, and Lord and Lady,” Phaeron lied smoothly. What he was planning for the good of the Old Humans, and what the Mistress didn’t know wouldn’t hurt her.

As Phaeron planned (read: plotted) for the future, Ranma nodded, and after a few moments more communication, had filled Angelica and the two fighters in with as much of what he had seen above as he could. The main issue up there would be the sheer number of slimes. There were other tunnels leading into the first cavern, which probably meant more monsters. Ranma had seen a lot of ants, but slimes were an irritant because none of his strikes or anything else would dissipate them. The only way Ranma could deal with them was to thrust his fist into them and then use a Moko Takabisha inside their bodies.

Turning from that, Ranma explained his plan to Kasumi. “I figure you all can stay here until I clear out the cavern, once Angelica’s fireball has dealt with the slimes. Then, while I go up and scout for a bit, see if we can find a cul-de-sac or someplace where we can rest up, ya can come up to the next floor. Maybe when we’re up there, though, it will be a good time for a meal.”

Kasumi grimaced just a little bit, but she couldn’t argue. *Not to the idea of a meal for this lot, though I pray some of their supplies are anything but meat, and the idea of Ranma and Phaeron going ahead, as they have been, is simply too good a plan not to continue with.*

“So long as you remember to bring out the fabber, Ranma, and those rocks I demanded you put in your, ugh, ki space,” Phaeron grumbled. “We should be able to make the parts of another ROG in a few hours, Mistress,” Phaeron argued.

Ranma instantly did so, pulling out the fabber, the rocks from the golem, and the shattered stairwell from one of his pockets, causing many a look of surprise. “//Fascinating, a bag of holding linked to a pocket rather than a pouch. Intriguing, but not exactly groundbreaking//” Angelica murmured. “//Although, I dearly wish I understood what else they had said, including that little floating construct.//”

Shaking her head at that, Angelica pushed herself to her feet and looked around at the rest. “//Come, ladies and gentlemen, we have a dungeon cavern to clear out.//”

Ranma blinked at that, staring at Angelica, then looking over at Michelo and Gregar. “Oy! I thought she understood I only wanted the fireball, not anything else!”

The others, who had begun to groan even as they pushed themselves to their feet, paused, staring at Ranma, surprised by his loud outburst and the hand he had raised to stop

them. Angelica, too, looked confused, and Ranma, frowning, tried to mime out what he wanted again.

Soon, Angelica, now understanding Ranma didn't want anyone else to go up to the next floor with him, shook her head firmly. “//Absolutely not! I am not going to send you up there on your own. That is the height of arrogance for one thing; indeed, it is the height of stupidity. Even someone as good as you are needs someone to watch his back, Ranma//” Angelica argued, despite knowing that Ranma wouldn't understand her words.

Her tone and her body language would need to do, and she very ostentatiously crossed her arms across her chest, glaring at him, as Ranma stared back at her with incomprehension plain on his face. He tried again to go through his plan, but Angelica cut his attempt at communication by pulling out her blade and making a slashing motion with it in the air between them. She then gestured up with her sword, then gestured to herself with her free hand, then to Ranma. “//I am not going to let you do all the fighting for us//” she ordered, glaring.

The others, on the other hand, made no effort to move towards the stairwell whatsoever. The looks they were giving Ranma told both of them that they were most content with him doing the lion's share of the fighting. Angelica also noticed this and gave her followers another thinly veiled look of contempt before going right back to glaring at Ranma.

Watching this, Kasumi giggled a little, shaking her head. “She wants to fight beside you, Ranma. I'd recommend not arguing and just going along with things. Besides, from what I saw and what you told me about the fight before the ROGs and I came up the steps, Angelica was the only one of this group whom you would call capable.”

“Well, yeah, but, I don't know, I--” Ranma replied slowly, shaking his head again, but Angelica, her glare intensifying, stepped forward until her chest was nearly pressed into his, her face a rictus of determination.

Trying hard not to realize how close they were, Ranma backed away slightly, holding up his hands. “All right, all right! But up there I'm in charge,” he said, pointing to the first of her, then to him, then making a gesture with one hand above another, miming himself as the one higher up. It was the best he could think of for trying to tell Angelica that she would need to follow his orders.

She just nodded, and the two of them headed towards the stairwell, with Michelo and Gregar following. While Angelica would normally have trouble with someone else wanting to take over like that, in this situation, she understood all too clearly that Ranma knew more about combat than she did. *It would be like not trying to listen to the Queen when she's instructing me on politics. And Ranma doesn't seem the type to lord it over someone like all too many ladies and lords I've dealt with at the palace would be.*

Soon, they were near the top of the staircase, and Ranma gestured to Angelica again, using the same big explosion motion, before gesturing above them once more, indicating she should launch one. He then began to count on his fingers before pointing at Angelica as he reached zero.

Angelica nodded and held her hand up above her head. “//Well, at least I know what numbers ten through zero are in your language. Ready.//”

Seeing a fireball appear in her upstretched hand, Ranma nodded to the others, then raced up the stairs, holding his hand to one side, counting aloud as his fingers matched his words. By the time Ranma had finished counting, he had been up on the next floor for several seconds, his shouting bringing in the monsters.

To his surprise, beyond the slimes, rat monsters poured out of holes that he had thought were traps, along with several wasps like the ones they dealt with below. These were not quite as large, and the main problem for him would indeed have been the sheer number of slime monsters. They all started to close in on Ranma, but then Angelica was there, her fireball flashing forward, as wide and tall as she could make it, filling the whole of the cavern.

The fireball flashed out as Ranma leaped upward, grabbing at a stalactite and clinging there as the fire flashed below him, avoiding most of it. The rats and slimes were far too slow and were burnt to cinders in the case of rats and incinerated in the case of the slimes. The few ant monsters who had begun to appear were able to retreat slightly down the tunnels they came from, while most of the wasps were too high into the air for the explosion to work all that well on them.

They moved to attack Ranma, as he jumped back down after the fire passed, bringing down still more of them all the time, while Angelica charged forward. A searing crescent-shaped slash of flame erupted into the side of two ant monsters before she raced in, blade stabbing into another ant monster's side. Her first strike wasn't a killing blow, and it twisted around to try and attack her, but she ducked underneath and fire roared from her free hand, incinerating half of the monster and a lone slime who had been out of the area of her original attack's radius.

Meanwhile, the two scouts and the ROGS Kasumi had sent forward, half of their remaining number, set up around the staircase. From there, they fired into the mass of monsters. The wasps, like before, were their primary targets, and more than half of them were down in a few moments, while Ranma and Angelica, who were causing far more deaths, remained the center of the monster's attention.

Soon, Angelica reached Ranma's side and tried to remain there, realizing quickly that this wasn't very easy. He was bouncing all over the place, attacking, striking, moving, showing an ability with mid-air combat that was so good, Angelica wondered idly if it was somehow magic. Yet she still tried, using her sword and fire magic to help deal with any of the monsters she could.

This being a smaller cavern than the one below, and with most of the slimes slain during Angelica's initial attack, the battle didn't last very long. The last of the wasp monsters was killed by a dog, and Angelica ran through an ant monster, before stepping back, pulling her sword out of its chest and letting it collapse.

As it did, Angelica's free hand went up to her head as she suddenly became aware of a throbbing headache. "Drat it all, I've been using too much fire magic," she murmured low enough that none of the others could hear. *And I don't want to use any more of the painkilling herbs. We've only got enough for ten more doses between us, and there are far too many injured among the rest of this troop for me to abuse my authority like that.*

Raising her voice, she pointed at the two scouts. "You two, go get the others. I don't want us to let too much distance grow between us, and this cavern is secured for now."

As the two scouts descended back down the steps, Angelica canceled the spell on her sword that had kept it sharp and heated up the metal to let it punch through armor, only to gasp as the headache got worse. Angelica nearly went to her knees at the pain that suddenly was throbbing through her head, but she womanfully pushed through it. However, she couldn't stop herself from dropping her sword and reaching up to her head with both hands. *This is always so irritating!* she thought, stumbling.

This was something Angelica had been running into more and more frequently over the past four years. Whenever she used too much fire magic, her head would hurt, as if she were getting low on magical reserves. And yet, when later tested by her teachers, it would prove that she wasn't very low at all. It was simply something to do with how Angelica was using her magic, or how it was affecting her physical body. Angelica had always found that incredibly annoying, as if something was holding her back when it came to true mastery of her fire magic like the others in her family. Fire magic was a Redgrave trait going back to the time they joined the Holfort kingdom in the first place.

But every time Angelica asked one of her tutors, her father, or her brother for help, she had simply been told to work through it. That she would get over whatever was bothering her or blocking her as she grew in strength and experience. Even Gilbert didn't know what was bothering her or how to help. Both he and his father put it down to something on his mother's side of the family coming through in her when it hadn't in Gilbert.

Angelica tried to push through it, turning to look over at the scouts and constructs, only to stumble. Ranma caught her, causing her to blink as his hand grabbed her upper arm and held her still. He then gestured to her head, a look of concern on his face.

"I, I'm fine, Ranma, it will pass if I don't use magic for the rest of the day... and now saying that aloud and given where we are, I know how foolish that sounds," Angelica grumbled, but still tried to pull away.

While not understanding what she had said, Ranma knew that Angelica's fire powers seemed to be taking it out of her. *Would have thought two hours of simple walking'd be enough to rebuild her mana or whatever, but what do I know? Still, I might be able to help if it's just a migraine she's dealing with.* At that, Ranma pointed at her head, moving his fingers in the same offer of a massage as Kasumi had done, although he didn't know that. "Don't suppose ya want a head massage, do ya?"

Remembering what Ranma's fingers had been able to do in poking her hangers-on who were complaining about their injuries, Angelica hesitated, then nodded. "//...I hate to say it, but while you have not acted anything less than a gentleman so far, pray keep your hands to my head rather than letting them wander. What am I saying, you can't even understand me. Still, any port in the storm.//"

Understanding the nod at least, Ranma moved around behind her, his hands on either side of her head, where he began to press in gently with his fingers, behind her ears, over her temples, to the sides of her head and then inward towards the front of her forehead. *I saw Doctor Tofu do this a few times, and I did it once for Ukyo when we were studying for that science project. It should work.*

The moment in question had actually been one of the few times when Ranma had been allowed to go over to Ukyo's place without Akane, or indeed any of the others showing up to ruin things. Both of their science scores had been abysmal, and the principal had assigned an extra credit project to try to get their grades up. With Konatsu there to act as chaperone, and Akane being busy with the drama club, no one had objected.

Nothing romantic had happened despite Ukyo's halfhearted efforts. After the Wedding Disaster™, her attempts to after Ranma had faded, but that didn't mean she hadn't accepted when he had offered to give her a 'brain massage' as he'd jokingly called it at the time.

Now, it seemed to be working, as any tension he could see in Angelica's body from the pain she was in slowly went away.

For her part, Angelica couldn't stop herself from letting out a little mew as the pain of overusing her magic slowly dissipated, replaced by honest pleasure. *How, how could a head massage feel so good?! And where has it been all my life?*

Eventually, as she heard the sound of the others returning with the rest of the hangers-on, Angelica was reminded of her station and quickly raised a hand to tap at both of Ranma's hands, causing him to release her head. She took a step back, then smiled at him. "Thank you for that, Ranma. You're quite a handy fellow to have around."

Ranma flushed a bit at the smile on Angelica's face, but nodded, not understanding the words but understanding she was thanking him at least.

Moments later, the others clambered up the staircase, and there was a lot of complaining, pushing and shoving, sneering, and everything else until they reached shouting range of Angelica. At that, she began to browbeat them all into behaving better, then gestured them to one side of the large cavern, where Ranma had already begun to clear an area and gather some of the ant monster corpses.

Watching all this, Ranma shook his head. "Damn, but if this group really is some kind of adventuring party, they're kind of pathetic."

"I think whatever they are, they are quite over their head." Kasumi snorted gently. "I have to wonder where they all came from, and why they were in the dungeon in the first place."

"That last is probably simple. Remember, Holfort really respects adventurers, right? Well, Angelica and this group probably decided to get in some practice before the Academy," Ranma decided. That made sense to him. After all, why the heck would you want to practice reading, writing and whatever when you could be in a dungeon fighting monsters?

"That does make sense in a certain light, although it doesn't explain why they were so deep, and why, as we can plainly see, they are so out of their depth," Kasumi mused. "Although I suppose a trap depositing them on that floor could explain that at the very least."

"You can ask her all about it once we start learning the local language. Or maybe there's some kind of magic that'll teach us the local language," looking up teasingly at Phaeron as he said that.

"...Actually, as much as I hate to admit that magic has its place, all New Humans need to die in nuclear fire, it was patently known during the war against the New Humans that their communication skills were far, far better than our own. They had some magical means of teaching or at least understanding one another's different languages and intent that simple technology could not match, even then," Phaeron grumbled.

"That's nice. I wasn't looking forward to language lessons," Ranma said, with one thousand percent understatement. There was a reason why he didn't speak even Chinese very well: it was that he was utterly crap at languages. "But speaking of, are we going to tell Angelica or anyone else about how we've come from a world where this one is a game?"

"We don't have any identification papers or anything similar, if such a thing is normal here after all, so coming from another country via magical accident should work. We'll keep the whole game thing close to our chests, I think," Kasumi said after a few moments of thought before beginning to set up a fire pit. The others had all mimed tapping their stomachs, and there had been a lot of arguments about what little food supplies the locals had on them when they were waiting for the battle to finish. *Best to get some more food into them all now, before they start fighting over what little they have.*

Ranma joined her, quickly and efficiently creating a fire pit out of bits of chitin and shattered rock, causing Kasumi to smile and step back even as she continued their conversation. "Knowing about the game and what occurred there gives us knowledge we can use, if sparingly, and always with a sign to understanding that the people here are just that: people. They aren't caricatures in a game."

"Is that what your way of saying that Julius and the rest of those idiots might not be as bad as they were in the game?" Ranma joked.

"It was my way of saying that is indeed hopefully the case," Kasumi agreed seriously.

Phaeron grumbled, which came out as more of an electronic squawk than anything, the noise grating on the ears enough to have many look up at the orb with glares. "I am still uncertain if that theory is viable, even if the Angelica girl matches a character from that game. Stupid New Human, die in a ditch. But it would be the height of foolishness to assume that this world is entirely like that, and not just in terms of the characters, but everything else."

Ranma shrugged at that, then turned back to finish up with the fire. When he had it blazing away, he reached to the side, where he'd placed a large treasure chest that he'd found in an alcove hidden between several of the stalactites that dominated this room, which was more natural-looking than the walls. It was a very odd look, but Ranma supposed that the dungeon didn't care.

While Kasumi started working on some of the ant parts with the fabber, Angelica started divvying up the food supplies her followers had, and Ranma tried to pick the lock. This failed, and he brought his hand down hard on the metal lock, shattering it. As he did, the trunk opened wide, attempting to attack him, a mimic, like in so many games. Ranma's hand flashed up, though, catching its tongue, while the other grabbed the lid, tearing it entirely off of the creature in a welter of blood that created a very interesting pattern in the wall behind it. He tossed the lid to one side, then, using the grip of the tongue, lifted the rest up, before smashing it down into the ground.

As the monster splattered everywhere, a bracer made of gold rolled clear, and Ranma reached down, grabbing it, looking at it thoughtfully, before turning towards Angelica and the others. "Michelo."

The rest of the group had been watching this with some surprise and even a bit of fear at seeing another sign of Ranma's superhuman physical abilities. Now, Michelo raised his hands to catch the thing Ranma tossed him, whereupon he blinked, gawking at the item. The bracer was made to cover his forearm from just below the elbow to the wrist and studded with several jewels. The thing looked as if it would be worth at least a full suit of armor or maybe even a barebones Knight Mech.

He stared at Ranma, his eyes wide as he shook his head. "I can't take this!"

"You should," Angelica observed, while a few of her followers grumbled a little. "But might I examine it for a moment?"

Blinking Michelo did so, still a little bemused by how polite Angelica was being. He then watched as the woman who could have simply demanded he hand the treasure over to her as her just due as the highest-ranking noble lifted the treasure to her face, then pushed her mind out in a way that she had been taught to use other magical items. There was no response, and she quickly opened her eyes and handed it back to Michelo, causing him even greater shock.

"There's no inherent magic in it, but I would estimate the cost of the gold and jewelry in particular to be quite high. Might I recommend that you and Gregar split it? Combined with what my family will owe the pair of you for your good work in this dungeon, you both might be able to buy fully customized Knight Mechs or magically enhanced adventurer outfits and still have a good nest egg for when we go to the Academy."

That was a good deal more expensive than Michelo had estimated the thing, and he looked at her quizzically, to which Angelica gestured down to a few of the gems. "You have to take into account the gems and the rarity of those gems in our country. Blood rubies like that are **expensive** in the extreme, and if I miss my guess, that other jewel, the white and blue one, is a savanna pearl. It isn't the best cut I have ever seen, but alone the gems would be worth a plate armor suit enhanced with magic and weaponry."

While the other nobles around them, particularly the ladies, hummed or stared at the pair thoughtfully, the two men stood, staring at one another, then bowed profusely to Angelica, trying to downplay their roles, but she was having none of it. "You both have done amazingly well here, and I have no doubt that you will continue to accrue honors to your name and houses. As to my wanting to recompense you and all my followers here for the troubles that this dungeon has caused, that is simply common sense."

While wondering internally how Lady Angelica could think that when so very few nobles, especially women, would even bother to consider paying a man back for helping to defend them, Gregar and Michelo bowed again, then went over to thank Ranma.

Kasumi watched all this, wondering idly whether or not money was all that hard to get, and if these two were not nobles, or perhaps from a lower tier of nobility than the rest of them. *They certainly seem more used to doing a day's work, anyway. Could they be barons or baronets... I can't remember which was the lower rank, drat it. Knights were the lowest, I know that. Well, among nobles, anyway. Commoners were obviously even lower than that.*

Driven by a sudden curiosity, she glanced at Angelica, and getting her attention, she pointed at her, then, taking a page out of Ranma's book, she gestured above her head, before pointing at Angelica again. She then pointed at a few of the others before waving her hand underneath where her first hand was still hovering, as if wondering where to put them in comparison to the others.

“//My word, but I think we are all getting amazingly good at charades.//” Angelica laughed as she moved to join Kasumi by the fire. “//And I think it has finally occurred to you at least that I am a noble. Excellent. Yes, we are all nobles here.//”

She gestured to a few of the girls, then to where they would be in the hierarchy, before gesturing to a few others, before herself at the top, as Kasumi had, and the two scouts near the bottom. Michelo was a baronet, his father having been a landed knight who had served well in the last war against the Principality of Fanoss. Gregar was a baron. The two of them came from the same area of land and were friends long before they entered Angelica’s sphere.

She didn’t explain any of that, though, knowing this would go over Kasumi’s head. Finished with that, Angelica then gestured all around them at the dungeon before pointing at Ranma and Kasumi, then stood up to raise her hand even higher above her head than where she had indicated her own position in the hierarchy. Understanding, Kasumi laughed, while Ranma gave her two thumbs up and the rest of her followers stared at Angelica agog.

Even Phaeron acknowledged that Angelica seemed to have a decent amount of common sense at that. Which, considering that she was a New Human, was pretty much the most complimentary thing he could say. Literally. Complimenting her further would probably physically hurt Phaeron’s hardware in some fashion.

However, the AI did this for its own reasons. “Given what you have told me of Angelica’s probable status in this world, as well as my understanding of past monarchies, it is almost certain that anyone with common sense is going to be in the minority among nobility. Fostering a connection with Angelica after we leave this dungeon might prove beneficial. Even if she is a New Human and thus inherently inferior.”

Sitting down once more, Angelica stared up at the floating ball thing, somehow sensing that it had insulted her, but shook her head then. She then pointed to each of the entrances into this large cavern before shrugging her shoulders, indicating she had no idea where to go.

Ranma pointed to each in turn before twirling in place. When he stopped, his finger had landed near one. He shrugged and moved in that direction before pointing to the two scouts and directing them down one of the other ways. “Phaeron, take some of the ROGS and go with them. Leave a few of the others here to protect Kasumi and the rest of this group.”

Whatever response Phaeron might’ve made to this comment was interrupted by the sound of several stomachs grumbling like a herd of lions. Ranma blinked, then looked around at the suddenly sheepish and annoyed-looking nobles, with even Angelica pouting and looking away, holding her stomach with her arms around it.

Kasumi laughed, shaking her head, making a wait motion. “The food’s almost ready, but you still need to let the meat cubes cook!”

“Ehh, funnily enough, I ain’t hungry yet. Still, save me a skewer or two.” With that, Ranma waved jauntily at Kasumi before heading off.

Even as she began to prepare a glaze for the meat in a mixing bowl with some spices that, like the rest of the cooking equipment, had been in Ranma’s ki space, Kasumi frowned just a little bit. Ranma still wasn’t taking this whole dungeon experience thing seriously enough, but she couldn’t deny that, surrounded by so many other people, she was probably quite safe.

Phaeron did not agree. “Mistress, do you wish for me and the other ROGS to remain here? That would be my suggestion. This group doesn’t seem to be all that capable, and certainly I would not be willing to trust your survival to it, even if they were Old Humans and thus worthy of consideration as anything but fertilizer.”

“Set one ROG at each of the other entrances, and one over at the entrance into the staircase. If this area had shadow monsters, I think they would already have been attacking us. Other than that, program the fabber for me, and then head out with the scouts as Ranma requested, Phaeron,” Kasumi decided. “Then, when you get back, we’ll need to talk about what else this fabber can do to help us. I rather doubt that any of this group have any camping gear or equipment on them.”

As the strange circular familiar let loose a low groan of some kind and seemed to begin to mutter under its breath, Angelica shifted over to sit next to Kasumi, making an interrogative noise as she watched the fabber work, cubes of meat coming out from the other end as she watched, ostensibly from the bits of ant monster Kasumi had already fed into it. When the line of cubes ended, and Kasumi seemed to frown, looking down at where she was working on some kind of past, Angelica barked a series of commands. Several of the menfolk came over to help cut and feed bits of ant monster into the construct in manageable chunks. At the same time, Angelica took over, sticking the cubes onto skewers, laying them in front of where Kasumi was working.

By the time another dozen skewers had been prepared and the others had reluctantly shared out their own food supplies around the fire, the two archers and Phaeron were back. “Lady Angelica, we found a cavern without another entry, a small one. There are a lot of dungeon torches there and darker-than-normal shadows. Beyond that, though, we didn’t see any sign of more monsters.”

Angelica stood up, gesturing Ariel to take over for her. “Keep preparing those skewers. This dead end is a defensible position. I’ll clear out the shadow monsters, and we can move there for the night. I don’t know about any of you but I am the next best thing to exhausted.”

She looked over at Kasumi, who had apparently been following this. She then gestured to herself and one of the ROG creatures, miming going in the same direction, then using the same expansive gesture Ranma had used to describe her fireballs.

Kasumi frowned thoughtfully, then nodded, and looked up at Phaeron. "Send all of the ROGS with her, just in case."

"Mistress, I must protest. Surely, we should wait until Ranma comes back. As annoying as I find him, and how illogical manner I find his abilities from an Old Human, his capabilities are supremely helpful in any kind of combat situation."

"Did that actually hurt you to say?" Kasumi teased dryly, staring up at the ball with amusement plain on her face. Phaeron didn't bother to reply, and she shook her head at the chuckle. "As capable as Ranma is, we can't rely on him for everything. If Angelica thinks she can clear an area where we might be able to bed down for the night, I think we should let her do it. Particularly, since we have no idea how long it will be before Ranma comes back."

When she saw all the ROGS coming towards her, Angelica smiled at Kasumi, nodding, then turned to the scouts and a few others, her face firming as Kasumi watched her give out some commands. "//Set up watch on the staircase and that last hallway, I want at least three of you on each. I think we can let the one that Ranma went down unguarded for the moment, but keep one person to keep watch that way as well.//"

Angelica waited, then glared as none of the others got up to join Michelo and Gregar, who had quickly broken up to take up position at the remaining tunnel and the top of the stairwell, respectively. "What part about that sounded as if I was not giving you an order, ladies and gentlemen?"

At that, a few of the others finally began moving away from the fire, where they had been staring longingly at the meat skewers, and Angelica decided to add some honey to her stick. "Those on watch will get first dibs on the food."

This sparked squawks of outrage from many of the ladies among her entourage, who obviously had thought that they would be getting fed first, but Angelica ignored their protests, heading towards the entryway into the tunnel that Gregar and Michelo had come from, tossing a final taunt over her shoulder. "Live with it, ladies. Do try to act as if you remember what made your family's nobles in the first place, would you?"

OOOOOOO

Ranma smiled as he saw the bottom of a staircase ahead of him. It looked as if it doubled back into a spiral, and he had no idea how long he'd been walking, but he seemed to have finally gotten to the end of this passage. There hadn't been any offshoots, which had surprised him, given the length of the passage, until he realized that it had also been gently curving like the area below them. That had taken Ranma an embarrassingly long while to figure out, what with the number of traps and other things he had to disarm along the way, which had slowed his progress tremendously.

Now, though, the sight of the staircase had him smile widely as he spoke aloud. "Nice, I got lucky right off the bat. Although I wonder how many more floors there are before we get out of here? I'm having a lot of fun, even tripping these traps is kind of interesting, but the lack of sunlight and wind is getting to me and I know it's getting to Kasumi."

Indeed, Ranma knew it had been getting to Kasumi a lot more than she had been willing to let on when it had just been the two of them. However, meeting more people seemed to buoy her spirits quite a bit. *Mind you, I could probably do without the rest of them, but at least Angelica, Michelo and Gregar are proving useful. And Angelica's nice to look at too... stop that, damn it! Maybe Akane had a point, if all it takes to make me start noticing other girls is to get away from her permanently... Or would the permanent part of that sentence kind of cross out the whole pervert thing, since I ain't in a relationship any longer and can at least look?*

Shaking his head again, Ranma tried not to let his mind remember the moment when he realized how much side boob Angelica was showing him after the fight back in the large cavern. It had been remarkably enticing, as had the grim little smile she wore as the fight ended, the look in her eyes of a job well done and the flush of a challenge overcome.

It almost reminded him of Shampoo when she had completed a martial arts training exercise for her grandmother. Those were the few times that Ranma had allowed himself to acknowledge how attractive the Amazon girl was underneath her pride, arrogance, and societal baggage. For a moment, Ranma compared Angelica and Kasumi to the girls back home. To say that all of the girls who had been chasing him back in Nerima lost that comparison was an understatement.

Not just in looks, either. Both Kasumi and Angelica, despite the language barrier with the local lady, listened to him. They didn't automatically think they knew better; indeed, both were willing to listen to and follow his suggestions up to a point. Angelica's desire to contribute, to charge into battle alongside him didn't grate nearly as much as it would have with Akane, because she was clearly quite capable with her fire magic and sword, and also was willing to still play second fiddle to him in the fight; following after rather than going off on her own and assuming she could handle it or that Ranma should follow her instead.

Neither of them had hit him, nor tried to convince him to follow their orders or decisions just because they were the ones making the decision. *Admittedly, that's a big 'yet,' what with the whole dungeon thing, but still, it's a nice change.*

Ranma's musings had brought him to the bottom of the staircase. There, he removed two tripwire-type traps that he had been able to disable without even thinking about it. Now, he stared upwards, craning his head around the spiral staircase, seeing an area underneath one of the weird torches that was just a little too dark to be natural. "Turn back, or continue on?" he mused aloud, turning off his back to the stairwell for a moment.

Just as he had thought, the shadow monster couldn't fight its instincts at seeing someone turning its back on it. The shadow monster launched itself out of the shadows, claws raised, but Ranma ducked under it, and a glowing blue fist slammed upwards into its face, exploding on impact, shredding the shadow. The shadow creature fell to the stones of the staircase, lying there for a brief second before dissipating, the area underneath the torch becoming much less dark than it had been.

"Forward it is," Ranma quipped, snickering slightly to himself. He moved forward along the staircase, examining each stair slowly and carefully, seeing no sign of a trap just yet. That was, until he was halfway around the staircase and the entire thing came apart.

It was that sudden. One moment, Ranma put a step down, and the cobblestone underneath his foot gave despite having shown no signs of a trap before. The next second, both sides of the tunnel and the roof above him suddenly began to fall, as a series of stones shifted out of position, the whole lot crashing down on him.

Several slammed into his back, despite his best efforts to dodge, and then he found himself tumbling down with them as the stairs also gave way. "KUSO!!!" he howled, then grunted as he slammed into not the solid ground he had been expecting, but water. Deep, **dark** water, with more bits and pieces of masonry coming down with her. The only light Ranma could see was from the faint torchlight high above, and she was forced to cover her head as still more bits of rock and rubble came down through the water, their fall thankfully slowing.

Holding her arms above her head, Ranma began to dodge, as still more masonry and bits of rock came tumbling down. Luckily, the trap didn't extend away from the stairwell, and there had been two torches right as the stairs began, giving Ranma enough light to see where she needed to go once the last of the rocks stopped falling.

She was nearly to the surface when she sensed more than she saw movement below her. She didn't stop swimming, and a second later, her head broke the surface. Ranma had a brief moment to breathe in with a gasp, just before something grabbed her from around the waist and tugged the redhead back down.

For a moment, the water stilled, not even ripples visible. This ended with an explosion of water as a large form was hurled upwards, smacking off the roof of the tunnel before landing on the floor. The fish, which looked almost like some kind of metal-infused deep-sea fish, with several more tentacles at the front than was really necessary, had no light to lure in prey. As it landed, it flopped around, its eyes rolled back in its skull and a good number of its teeth were missing. Moments later, the redhead popped up, grabbing at the edge of the area where the stairwell had once been, before she pulled herself out of the water, where she gasped for a few seconds.

Pushing herself to her feet, Ranma tenderly touched a few areas where her shirt and pants had been torn away, then kicked the fish down the hallway, grumbling. "Damn suckers!

Those damn things left marks even on my skin. Probably'd tear anyone else to shreds even with their armor."

With a shake of her head, Ranma turned back, tearing one of the torches off the wall, ignoring the sound of twisted metal that came from it as she did, waving it out over the water. There was still movement down there, and she shook her head before turning her attention upwards, staring at what looked like a smooth surface above. Grimacing, Ranma sighed, then leapt outwards, kicking off the far wall of what had been the stairwell, then again and again upwards, only to curse luridly as she discovered that at the end of the stairwell, there had been a dead end. Grabbing onto the rock there with her free hand, her fingers dug into the stone, growling angrily. "Great, all that work for nothing?"

Retracing their steps, she landed once more on the side of the water trap. She stared at the fish before shrugging her shoulders. "Well, at least it's not red meat. Kasumi should be happy about that, at least."

In point of fact, Kasumi wasn't so happy at the moment. Unfortunately, the only creatures that had been involved in this latest battle that was edible were the ant monsters, and there hadn't been very many of them. The wasps did not make good eating at all, although the metal of their needles, combined with the metal of the torches, had given the fabber enough iron and whatever else was needed to start creating another dog.

The downside of this was that there had only been enough meat to go around for a few skewers for each of the nobles. Their own supplies hadn't really spread out much, and that had started arguments and shouting almost the moment everyone understood that to be the case.

Angelica was on her last nerve when the giant fish was flung into the cavern, landing with a splat on the far wall, causing many shrieks and shouts of dismay. Those shrieks dissipated as Ranma came into view in his female form, her clothing still hugging her body like a second skin, given how wet it was, except where it had been torn away, revealing red, swollen welts.

This gave many of the menfolk there a sight for the eyes, but wasn't enough to stop them and the girls from staring in confusion, wondering where the hell the redhead came from, and where Ranma was. "//Who are you, stranger?//" Angelica demanded, a fireball slowly appearing in one hand. Her headache had come back after dealing with the shadow monsters in the dead-end cavern but she pushed through it.

"Ranma, what did you find?" Kasumi asked, already moving to pull the kettle of tea off from where it had been heating up near the fire. Touching it gently, she felt it was hot enough and held it out to Ranma as she made her way over to the older girl.

The use of Ranma's name there had caused Angelica to pause, staring at the redhead and Kasumi, before her eyes widened as the redhead took the teapot with a nod of thanks and

poured the water over her head. Ranma stood there, his clothing clinging to him as it had the redhead, no sign of teleportation or anything similar visible.

Angelica frowned, nodding her head. "Some manner of curse, then? Which is the original form?" Thinking for a second about how to ask that question, she waited until Ranma and Kasumi finished speaking, whereupon Kasumi went over to look at the fish with her strange, floating summoned creature.

Ranma turned in her direction, his mouth open as if to give an explanation, then sighed and scratched at his pigtail, a gesture Angelica knew meant embarrassment, and she nodded in agreement. "Yes, the language barrier is a bit of an annoyance."

With that, she held up her hand, making a one gesture than a two gesture with either hand, before looking at Ranma quizzically, holding out one hand and then the other to her, as if asking which form came first. Ranma frowned for a few seconds, but like Angelica and several of the others, he had gotten very good at charades over the last few hours. He pointed at himself, then held up a one, smacking his chest with a hand firmly, then gestured to where he had come from, and held up a two.

"I see, this is your original form, and the other is a curse form or something. I rather doubt that wherever you are changing gender with water is normal," Angelica mused, taking the magic in stride in a way that had Ranma's eyes widening just a little bit.

Then he snorted at himself. *Wait, that's right. Magic is common here is in it. My curse might be a little weird but not all that unusual. That's kind of neat.*

"I've been meaning to ask, Ranma, but does that change come with any mental or emotional shifts? It had long been known in my time that men and women think very differently from one another in terms of problem-solving, how they handle emotions, and so forth," Phaeron mused.

"My mind stays male if that's what you're wondering. The only times I've ever fully acted like a girl in my alt form are when I've had some head trauma or been under some kind of magical control."

Phaeron made a buzzing sound like a horde of angry bees for a moment, but Ranma and Kasumi had told him that they had run into a lot more magic back home than just the youma that had sent them here before this. While **very** unhappy at the idea that there had been magic of any kind where they'd come from, it wasn't enough to cause his logic sensors to crash like seeing Ranma's curse for the first time had.

"I don't handle emotions differently in one form or another, if that's what you're asking. The taste of food mostly doesn't change much either, except chocolate and sweet things taste a lot better and girl form."

“While I understand why you would think food is the most important thing, do I take it right then that your preferences do not change either?”

Ranma blinked in confusion. “What do you mean, preferences?”

“I mean, in your female form, are you a lesbian, straight, or bisexual?” Phaeron inquired bluntly.

Ranma’s face instantly turned red, and he reached up, smacking Phaeron hard enough to send him flying into a wall. “The hell, man! You don’t just say shit like that! And for your information, I’m a guy inside whatever form I am, that means I’m straight!”

“Technically, that would mean you would be a lesbian in your female form,” Phaeron muttered, thankful that his drone was made of very stern stuff, or else the force of that blow might well have caused it to come apart like the ROGS had when Ranma first ran into them in his base. “Duly noted Modifying A2.r.”

Deciding it wasn’t worth it to smack the robot again, Ranma turned back to the fish, where Angelica and a few others had begun to help Kasumi remove the scales and cut off the tentacles, ignoring the conversation between the floating orb and Ranma. This was hard going as many of those scales and the tentacles were made of metal, but with Ranma’s help, they were able to do it.

As the fabber worked on turning those metal bits into yet another dog, which would bring them up to a total of nine, Phaeron ran his sensors over the fish meat and declared it edible. With that, Ranma went to work filleting it, using one of the swords donated to him for the purpose by another of Angelica’s hangers-on.

Soon they had a giant chunk of fish cooking over the fire, while Phaeron headed down the hallway Ranma had come from, returned quickly, and then created a 3D map for everyone to look at for a moment. “So, the way up has to be through that third passage,” Ranma mused as he pulled off one of the bits of fish, popping it into his mouth for a second. “I wish yer scanners could tell us more about the upper floors, Phaeron. Still, it’s nice to know how large these floors are.”

He chewed, then gave Kasumi a thumbs up, and the others quickly started to carve off bits of fish with small knives that all of them seemed to carry on their belts. Why that was he didn’t know, but it might be because that was a normal part of anyone’s dungeon diving kit that they all had in common, but whatever it was, those knives were certainly coming in handy now.

“Should we push up to the next floor, or retreat into the dead-end cavern for the night?” Ranma asked.

"I think if you have energy, then you can go down that passage with Michelo, Gregar and a few of the ROGS." Kasumi hummed thoughtfully as she looked around at the others. She knew Ranma wasn't asking if that was a good idea tactically but socially, so to speak. "Once everyone has a full stomach, it won't be long before people start nodding off on their feet. We need a good night's rest."

As the two of them talked, several of the nobles were looking at Kasumi speculatively. "Is she some kind of servant? Wasn't there a special term for servants who follow their masters into dungeons, take care of camps and so forth?" Ariel murmured.

"I'm wondering if she's a bed warmer too," one of the other girls muttered, sneering just a little bit. "Seems pretty enough to be... adequate at that service, and I know some boys like to take such in other countries."

"Letting out your base jealousies like that is not beneficial at this time or something any noblewoman should ever do," Angelica growled, causing the other girl to stiffen. "As for Kasumi being a simple servant, I very much doubt it. She does not have the same attitude as my own maids, or any of yours, I would imagine." She also didn't seem very used to the dungeon life, if some glimpses of Kasumi's drooping shoulders and morose looks around them Angelica had spotted throughout the trip so far were any indication.

Honestly speaking, Angelica thought the two of them looked like quite a nice couple, although as the day had worn on, her idea that they were indeed one had faded, replaced by wondering indeed why Kasumi was there at all. She hadn't done any of the fighting except when one of the dead ant monsters had proven not to be so dead, whereupon she had thrown it quite expertly away from herself. She didn't seem interested at all in some of the treasure that had been passed around back in the large cavern below, and now seemed completely ignorant of the treasure that had been in the sea monster, a large pearl that would fetch a very good price.

Whereas Ranma was very obviously an adventurer of some kind. Certainly, his expended pocket space seems to have a lot of the items that most adventurers had on them. *And again, I curse myself for not having checked all of my party's equipment before we came here*, Angelica thought, shaking her head at yet another mistake she'd made heading into this adventure.

Ranma and Kasumi finished speaking, and Ranma looked over at Angelica, miming putting his head on something with both hands underneath his cheek as if it was a pillow, then pointed down the tunnel leading to the dead-end cavern. Glancing around, Angelica frowned for a moment before reluctantly understanding. "Yes, I think all of us would do well with the night's rest."

Ranma nodded at that, then went back to eating, leaving it to Angelica to organize the rest of her so-called companions, something else she appreciated about both Ranma and

Kasumi. Neither of them seemed to want to take charge when they didn't have to, but backed her up with her hangers-on.

Now, Angelica pointed to Ariel and Carmen, making it clear that she expected them to go ahead of them into the cavern just to make certain that no monster had randomly spawned there since she had cleared it out. Then Angelica looked around at the others, asking if any of them had knowledge of setting traps. "I'd like us to leave a lot of traps in this area, and then along the hallway leading into the cavern with the dead end."

Surprisingly, several of the boys nodded at that, with Michelo and Gregar amongst them, which didn't surprise Angelica so much. Those two were definitely proving their worth. *The heirs to a country baron and baronet house, they might be, but there is steel in those two; whereas the others have not shown nearly as much worth here.*

The group continued to eat for a while, then, when everyone had their fill, Ariel and Carmen were sent off into the cavern with a few of the boys, while Ranma and the others who knew about traps began setting up areas around the open cavern. Some were traps, some were just areas where you couldn't put a foot down without causing crunching noises from the various bits of ants and wasp monsters left behind. Those wouldn't last longer than a few hours as the dungeon absorbed it all, but the traps, foreign objects, would last for a bit longer.

When they all headed into the dead-end cavern, two of the ROG constructs were left behind, much to her surprise. She didn't argue, though as it made sense.

When they arrived, though, problems once more arose. As Angelica had known, only a few of the followers had brought along sleep rolls, and when they saw Ranma pull out a pair for himself and Kasumi, a few of the girls, with Ariel among them, demanded that Ranma give over his bedroll.

While the language barrier came into play, the tone very obviously came across as his face started to darken, and his hands clenched at his side. If not for Kasumi gently touching his shoulder, Angelica was certain that Ranma might well have resorted to violence. *Not, mind you, that is at all something I would object to at the moment,* she thought grumpily. Her headache had faded a bit, but it was still there as she turned away from finishing setting up her own bedroll near the far wall from the loan entryway into this cavern. She was tired, sore and fed up by this point.

"Every time I use this phrase, it feels as if I am using the descriptions therein on people who are less and less worthy of them. Ladies and gentlemen," Angelica paused for a moment to allow her disdain and the true meaning of her words to sink into every mind there, "your actions do you no credit. Do not badger or attempt to pull rank on our new companions, or Michelo or Gregar. You will note that I have my own sleep roll as well, and you all should have been prepared for the unexpected when entering a dungeon in any event. Really, what have your parents been teaching you?"

The narrow-eyed glare that accompanied those last words had everyone shuffling their feet, the men muttering about swordsmanship and etiquette, while the women muttered something about money under their breath. That this included Ariel and Carmen, both of whom were heiresses to marquises, was somewhat worrisome.

On the one hand, Angelica could understand. Etiquette classes, classes on law, custom, decorum, and so forth, did take a lot of time. But she had those lessons, on top of learning from Queen Mylene, her relationship with Julius, and more lessons about politics than you could shake a stick at. Yet she still found time to train with her sword and magic, and to go through at least one book based on adventurers or dungeon diving a month for the past few years. She had read those books, taken history lessons, and gotten the right message from them. It seemed to her that many of her followers had not read either read those books or taken their lessons to heart as they should have as members of Holfort's nobility.

With the shouts and demands having subsided, Ranma set himself up across the entryway so that if anything tried to enter, they would have to either step over or on his body. That was, frankly, immensely gratifying to see, and Angelica knew she would sleep far more easily than otherwise.

Despite that, she was determined to get a good night's sleep, and when a few mutters once more began, she glared them all into submission, before, with her armor, Ranma's shirt, and leggings still on, she climbed into her bedroll, her sword near to hand, already out of its sheath. "I am going to try to sleep. All of you should do the same. With the ROGS watching and Ranma where he is, we don't even need to have someone on watch. We have a long, hard day ahead of us tomorrow, and we all need our rest. Therefore, and I say this with what little of my patience remains, if anyone complains loudly enough for me to hear from here, I will launch fireballs and ask questions from the survivors."

It was indeed a sign of how frayed her temper was that Angelica allowed herself to show such anger, but frankly, the situation warranted it. Thankfully, her words seemed to do the trick. Everyone began to lie out where they were, bar the most injured, who remained up a little longer to take more of the painkilling herbs.

While they were doing that, Kasumi moved to put herself to one side of where Ranma had been. Soon, the dungeon lights, pulled off the walls and set in the middle of the room, began to go out slowly, leaving only the lights from the hallway leading into the dead-end cavern as the teens began to fall asleep one after another.

OOOOOOO

"You sent for me, father?" a blonde-haired, handsome man asked, a scowl on his face as he flounced into a chair, looking at the man who sat on the other side of a desk, the light of a very early dawn shining through a nearby window.

The two men were something in a study in contrasts at first glance, in both their clothing and body types. One was old and broad-shouldered, his hair cut close to his head with a decently maintained goatee and mustache. His face was lined with age, his hair was solid gray, and he was dressed for a day of work, in a good doublet and hose with leggings. Yet, for all that the younger man lacked the older man's broad shoulders, and his hair was solid blonde without even a hint of his father's black hair color when he was younger, and that he was still dressed in sleepwear, the two shared the same red eyes of all Redgraves.

"I did, yes, Gilbert. I'm sorry to call you away from your wife, but Angelica and her group of friends were supposed to check in from that dungeon dive that Angelica practically begged me to allow her to go on. They haven't, and I called the adventurer's guild on the island of Fontaine."

Fontaine was the tiny island where the dungeon Angelica had gone to reside. It had the typical local adventurer's guild, a single well-kept port, and was far higher in terms of altitude than the majority of Holfort's islands, but wasn't at all remarkable for that. It sat well away from the Redgrave holdings on the border, deep into the kingdom, well away from any border.

Vincent (Vince to his very few friends) Redgrave ran a hand through his sharp gray hair, then down to the back of his neck, kneading it, a sign of worry that Duke Redgrave would never have allowed anyone but his son to see. "The Guild just got back to me. The local branch sent a group to the dungeon, complete with communication crystals. They haven't reported back in. The Guild is in the process of doing an audit of any and all information on that dungeon, but I fear that something nefarious is going on."

Gilbert's lazy attitude instantly disappeared, and he leaned forward, staring at his father. "The guild must be furious to have lost one of their portable communication crystals. But Fontaine, I'm not familiar with that island. How quickly can I arrive and what should I bring along?"

"I want you to prepare one of our cruisers, complete with at least three Armors," the older man ordered. He pulled out a map, showing where the dungeon was, in relation to where they were.

On the map, the dungeon was labeled a D-rank dungeon, which, Gilbert pointed out, should never have troubled Angelica and her followers. "Particularly with Klaus and Kellerman with them," he added, frowning.

"No, it shouldn't have. However, something **has** gone wrong. Why or how doesn't matter. All that does is that we retrieve Angelica and her party from wherever she is," Duke Redgrave said grimly. "Setting aside the personal, as much as I don't want to right now, losing that many of our faction's young folk would be disastrous."

"Of course. I'll be on my way in an hour. But that far away, a cruiser will have us there in what fourteen hours?"

"Sixteen if you don't push your mana engines to the point of decay. I took the liberty of looking at the weather predictions for that territory, and it isn't going to be fun. I would suggest, Gilbert, that you bring along some seasickness medicine for yourself." Duke Redgrave allowed himself a faint smile before standing up, forcing Gilbert to do the same, reaching over and grasping his son's shoulder. "But go quickly regardless. I will be trying to figure out if this is indeed some random dungeon disaster that has gone poorly for Angelica, or if... If something else is going on here. The news of that dungeon reaching Angelica, how she chose that specific dungeon, and whether or not our maps have been in any way altered... If they have, then..."

"Then, having three Armors and a cruiser with me might prove efficacious, if whoever is behind this made that team of adventurers disappear rather than the dungeon. I'll be gone in an hour," Gilbert promised, before striding for the door.

Behind Gilbert, a very, very worried father stared after him for a moment before steeling his shoulders and ringing a small bell. There was a mystery to get to the bottom of here. And it would be better to concentrate on that work rather than brood. *Besides, it will make planning our bloody vengeance all the easier, whatever Gilbert might report.*

OOOOOOO

The next day, after a hearty breakfast of meat skewers that had Kasumi practically gagging and looking like she wanted to be anywhere but where she was right now. Many of the ladies in the group looked similarly dismayed and in pain as the pressure points Ranma had used on them had worn off. This didn't stop many from demanding Ranma use his pressure points on them all again despite now knowing that it wasn't in fact healing them, just making the pain go away for a bit. A few, though, understood and instead asked for massages, man and woman alike, which Kasumi agreed to, so long as someone else could feed the fabber and cook.

Once they were a little more comfortable with their diverse injuries, the group settled down to a meal, during which Angelica noted there were two more dog-like constructs than there had been before. That was very interesting, but she set it to one side to notice that she was feeling rather... backed up.

After heading out in groups to perform their morning ablutions, body processes, after all, didn't stop in a dungeon, the makeshift group of explorers set off through the dungeon once more, more energetic if nothing else as their rest had been undisturbed. Only a few rats and wasp monsters had tried to attack them, but Ranma had dealt with them via Sleep Fu. The monsters' remains had been splattered all around the entryway into the cavern, and none of the others had even woken up, as tired as they had been.

With Ranma and the two scouts in the lead, they headed down the last remaining corridor, leaning off the first cavern he and the rest had filled. Whereupon they ran into a few monsters, particularly slimes and rats, along with a few more traps. Thankfully, not nearly as many as there were on the floor below. Better, most traps on this floor were a little easier to spot, too.

However, that didn't mean that there weren't any of them, nor was this tunnel as simple as the other two, as it led to a series of offshoots and corridors before ending abruptly. This forced them to retrace their steps and head down one of the offshoots, then more until they found a fifth offshoot that kept going. This tunnel, which narrowed dangerously to the point where they had to go one at a time through it, made dealing with the few monsters they ran into much harder.

Still, with Ranma in the lead, they made good time until one of the young nobles accidentally elbowed one of the dungeon lights. Instead of causing the young woman to reel back with a wince, the dungeon light shifted, twisting around a central axis like a wheel. "What the—"

Her voice was cut off by Phaeron, who released a loud siren-like noise that Ranma recognized as an air raid siren, the sheer volume causing everyone, the whole group having spread out quite a bit thanks to the nature of the tunnel, to yelp and clamp their hands over their ears, even dropping weapons occasionally. "Ranma, Mistress, I'm detecting movement from the ceiling both above and behind us!"

Ranma was still at the front of the group when a wall came down in front of him, blocking the way. At the same time, another one slammed down behind them, actually cutting off a few of the ROGS and two of the magic users who had been acting as a rear guard just in case.

While the rest began to panic and large sluices opened, dumping sand down, Ranma rolled his eyes. *Yeah, proof positive that dungeons aren't thinking, living things. I might not've used this technique all that often, but even once should've been enough.*

Even as the sand began to disrupt footing and panic rose, Ranma ran forward until his finger tapped the wall, which had fallen into the corridor ahead of him. "Bakusai Tenketsu."

Those close behind him grimaced as shards of stone slapped into them, with Kasumi blinking as one of them that would've caught her in the face was smacked aside by Ranma, but then he was through to the other side, waving them on. "Come on, the tunnel expands past this point."

The group stared at him one after another as they passed him by, but didn't have much time to comment, as a group of ant monsters appeared from several tunnels that linked into this one, charging towards them. However, the ROGS guarding Kasumi made short work of them

before Ranma could even move, laser bolts stabbing into and through their bodies. Shrugging at that, Ranma moved to destroy the wall behind them, letting those on the other side rejoice, their eyes wide as they stared at him.

As they did, Angelica shook her head, smirking over at Ranma, as she nodded in thanks. “//Well, that was anticlimactic. You’re a most handy individual to have around, Ranma.//”

Still not understanding her words, Ranma simply grinned at her, then headed off to take his place at the front of the column again. Behind him, Kasumi frowned a little bit as Ariel, one of the more useless members of the party, in her opinion paused, going green. “//Mistress, I thought that dungeon stone was unbreakable... did, did that...”

“//No, it is the exterior of a dungeon, the outer walls where the mana within cuts off, that is impregnable to any weapon known to man. The interior walls of a dungeon are less durable, as a dungeon can occasionally change its layout,//” Angelica lectured.

She then paused and looked over at Kasumi. She pointed upward, then to the rubble of the shattered wall. “//Although that does make me wonder why he doesn’t just shatter the roofs, and we make our way straight up.//”

Understanding, Kasumi shook her head, then pointed at Phaeron, before pointing at her eyes, and then covered them, before shrugging.

That took Angelica a bit to understand, but she slowly nodded. “Ah, I think that means they aren’t certain what is directly above us, more stone or more dungeon. And with Ranma being able to deal with every danger they’ve so far met, it doesn’t seem necessary to do all the time.”

Still, Angelica called out for Ranma’s name, then gestured upward. After he understood what she wanted, he understood, and jumped upward. His attempt to blast through the floor, though, failed, as it only smashed off a bit of stone rather than shattering a hole into the next wall.

“Huh...” Ranma mused, staring upward as he landed nearby, the debris of his attempt pattering down well away from the others. “That didn’t work. I wonder why I was able to do that before, but not now.”

“If you had asked me, buffoon, I would have told you. The stones that compose this floor above and below us are uniformly far denser and much more solid than the stones of the lower levels. What that means, I could not tell you, but it is a fact,” Phaeron huffed, that sound almost humanlike in comparison to his grumble or sigh for some reason Kasumi and Ranma put down to an oddity (another oddity, rather) in his programming. “I informed you before we ran into this New Human trash that my scanners could no longer penetrate the rock of the dungeon. Why would you think your odd, quasi-magical abilities work any better?”

“Why does it sound as if that little orb is remonstrating with Lord Ranma?” Michelo muttered to Gregar, who just shrugged his shoulders.

“Whatever the construct, or perhaps familiar, is saying, it seems as if that idea is a non-starter. We will have to continue on the normal way,” Angelica said as Ranma looked at her and shook his head. “//Well, thank you for trying.//”

While he didn’t understand her words, Angelica’s smile and shrug were enough to tell him that she was thanking him for the effort, and he just shrugged in turn, then reclaimed his place at the front of the column. Thankfully, the tunnel finished widening out soon, and the group could spread out again, despite giving the dungeon lights a wide berth from now on.

Two more serious fights later, during which the rest of the group used magic and ranged weapons while Ranma kept on bringing the monsters down on himself, the group found and ascended to the next floor. There they fought another, far more serious fight, nearly ending with several of the magic users being cut off and overwhelmed when ant monsters broke through parts of the cavern's walls. Yet Phaeron had once more warned them, this time with an air siren and a holographic beam hitting the danger zones in the walls, and the group was able to back away, letting some of the sword-wielding boys, battered but still able to swing a sword, to hold the line until the ROGS killed the ant monsters.

Once more, Michelo and Gregar performed admirably from start to finish, earning Angelica's thanks again. Carmen, Ariel, and several others, though, fought more to defend themselves than to work well with the group, except when she was shouting at them. Whether that was just a lack of training in a group or simply an unwillingness to exert themselves, Angelica didn’t care, but she made further notes on how her so-called friends acted in dangerous situations and would not forget.

A few more traps, three treasure chests and a mimic whose jeweled belt went into the communal treasure that Angelica was carrying in her bag of holding, later, they found the stairs again leading upwards. Or rather, they found two of them. Each stairwell was at the end of a T-junction, with Michelo, Phaeron and Gregar on one side and Ranma on the other.

Unlike the first time he’d come to such stairs, Ranma hadn’t bothered to try to climb the ones he found this time, instead returning to the others, somewhat worried as to what could come at them from the other side, while he was busy on the next floor. He also saw what looked like traps on the stairs, something they’d only seen a few times.

While Gregar and Michelo reported this to Angelica, Phaeron reported his own findings to them all. Or rather, to Kasumi, who was the only one he cared about, really. Well, her and Ranma, but he was a very distant second in Phaeron’s opinion. “I regret to inform you, Mistress, that my ability to scan through the ceiling is still not working very well. There are parts of the ceiling I can scan through and detect something moving on the other side, but I cannot tell what

it is. It could be sand or some form of liquid, perhaps connected to still more traps. I cannot scan through the walls of the dungeon in this area at all."

"You're worried that there will be traps up on the actual staircases, that's not good. Especially, if they are both spiral staircases and you can't see the end of them without actually heading up them," Angelica mused, turning and pacing away from Michelo and Gregar, who had just told her pretty much what Phaeron and Ranma had been telling Kasumi. "And I don't like the idea of simply assuming that Ranma will be able to break through whatever traps are there, especially if they are like the one he ran into yesterday."

Seeing that Phaeron was done speaking, Angelica hit on an idea and moved to Kasumi. When she saw the older girl was looking at her, she gestured to the mechanical dogs then down the sides of the T junction, then made a motion with her fingers as if they were walking up some stairs in midair. "//Would you mind sending some of these dogs up the stairs?//"

The message got across quickly enough, and Kasumi nodded thoughtfully. "//Two ROGS to both sides then?//"

She held up two fingers, then gestured to one side of the junction, then the other, and Ranma and Angelica nodded in unison. This caused them to look at one another, and for Ranma to grin, while Angelica simply snorted, looking back at Kasumi with a smile and a gesture asking her to start the ROGS moving.

Under Phaeron's orders (Once Kasumi ordered him in turn) the two ROGS chosen for each side separated from the rest of the group. This left them with seven, as the fabber had been busy the night before. The pairs each headed down their assigned hallways, while everyone else waited at the junction of the T, watching warily in both directions just in case.

Phaeron watched the world through the drone's senses. As a fully operational AI built to control a whole scientific laboratory, he could easily handle the data coming in from each side in real time. Thus, he saw the exact moment that things went wrong. Both pairs of ROGs had been moving at the same steady pace and had been winding around the stairwell several times when something shifted underneath their feet. Just as in the trap Ranma had reported, only on a far larger scale, the entire ceiling and the outer walls of the spiral staircases came apart, and torrential water poured through, as if the floor were in the middle of a large lake.

"Warning!" he blared, as the water slammed into the ROGs. "Massive waves of water incoming!"

Kasumi turned and pointed back the way they came, shouting, "RUN!"

That needed no translation, and the party, with Ranma and Gregar helping the two slowest wounded, tried to race away back the way they had come.

The noise of the crashing and thundering water reached their ears a bare few seconds later, but as they fled, the water must have tripped some kind of secondary trap. Another wall descended from the ceiling in front of them, nearly crushing Ariel, who yelled and hurled herself forward, barely getting away, while Angelica and Michelo pulled up short. This cut them off like in the sand trap they had dealt with on the floor below, and the water slammed into them from behind.

Ranma wasn't at the front of the group, slowed by needing to help one of the wounded. This meant he was out of position now as the door slammed shut, with several people between him and that wall. Worse, portions of the ceiling above them, those places Phaeron had warned about, also began to open up and further torrential water slammed down, crushing men and women alike to their knees or even to the ground, causing those with broken bones to cry out in pain and others to whimper in agony.

Kasumi found herself smashed off her feet, flipped up into the air, before she was slammed from above, crashing into a wall. Or would have, if not for Ranma dropping the wounded man and kicking off the opposite wall, then thrusting her arm in between the wall and her head, protecting Kasumi from a certain concussion if nothing else. She found herself pulled into Ranma's arms for a second and then there was water.

The rising water swirled, pulling at them both, quickly filling the tunnel above their heads, and a piece of rock crashed into Ranma's funny bone. Even a martial artist wasn't wholly immune to that kind of strike, and her arm loosened around Kasumi. Ranma still pushed Kasumi upwards with her other hand, though.

Breaking the surface of the still rising water, Kasumi breathed in deeply before diving down into the water, swimming easily to help those she could, pushing them up towards the surface. Many of them were panicking, grabbing their mouths and throats, having not had the time to breathe in. A few had, and many looked to be tapping portions of the wall, while Angelica, who had led the way away from the initial trap, was wildly gesticulating ahead of them, treading water easily.

Ranma pulled men and women aside, the tunnel's confines making this tougher than it should have been, even as the water pushed people up and off the ground. When Ranma arrived, she could see Angelica was trying to heat up her hand, trying to sear through that wall. However, a second later, that wall disintegrated at a touch from Ranma's finger, releasing the water and them all of them onto the floor on the other side, in an uncontrollable torrent as still more water was still being pressed down into the trap behind them.

However, that water now flooded the rest of this floor and beyond. The water began to drain away rapidly, sloshing around to ankle height, not that most of the would-be adventurers were in any condition to care overmuch about the science of what was happening. No, they were mostly too busy nursing new bruises or worse, new broken bones. The trap hadn't killed any of them but it had easily made a bad situation worse.

Well, not everyone. Ranma was fine. The water and everything else hadn't been enough to hurt her, except for that one stone to her funny bone. Now, oddly finding that her head had landed on something soft, Ranma snorted, shaking her head, causing a grunt from someone nearby.

"That was not fun at all, but eh, I've had worse, seven out of ten," she muttered, reaching up to clear her eyes of water, only to find her face pressed sideways against an acre of creamy thigh. Ranma blinked, flushed, then yelped as someone smacked her rear.

"Gah!" Hopping into the air, Ranma clung to the wall nearby staring, at where she only to find that she had been resting half on and half off Angelica. "Sorry!" she whimpered, backing away rapidly via the Clinging Gecko technique, until she was nearly on the ceiling.

"I am so thankful that you were in your female form just then, else I think I would've had to kill you," Angelica muttered, her own face flushed.

Whereas Ranma's head had been on her thigh, which, admittedly, Angelica knew her skirt had been pushed out of the way by the water, Angelica's own head had been nestled in between Ranma's thighs, where she had basically been directly on top of her. That had been disturbing in the extreme. *Still, we lived through it*, she mused, pushing to her feet, grunting at how sore her back was.

"Call out if anyone needs help," she ordered, trying to banish her embarrassment through sheer willpower.

Dealing with the injured took a while. This trap had left many of the group with more bruises, cuts and broken bones than they already had. The worst was to Michelo, who had practically broken every bone in his hand when the water had tumbled him out once Ranma had smashed opened the wall. It rendered his dominant hand practically useless, but pressure points from Ranma deadened the pain for him and many others.

A few of the others had further injured themselves, with Angelica herself sporting a new nasty bruise on one of her elbows that made straightening her arm extremely painful. Still, nothing had been broken, and she joined Kasumi in helping with the wounded, going through the last of their supplies, breaking out the clothing Carmen and Ariel had brought along to make slings and so forth.

Luckily, only two more had injured their legs, and only one of them had broken something in their foot to join the worst of the wounded. They could still walk with help from a crutch made by the simple expedient of using his sword as a walking staff, but that still meant they were going to be going much slower from now on. It also meant that Gregar and Angelica were pretty much the only real combatants among the Holtforians left. A few of the others could still use magic at range, but that was all they would be good for.

Worse, Ariel was entirely correct when she wailed out, "Where the hell do we go now! We didn't see any other area that could lead upward. Does that mean we have to go down and see if we can find another way back up somewhere?! In our condition!?"

Angelica might well have remonstrated with her harshly, as she saw the expressions on her followers' faces, but Kasumi held up a hand, gesturing for quiet. She then looked over at Ranma before gesturing to the remnants of the broken wall. While the words that followed were unknown, the firm, thoughtful way she spoke silenced the whimpers and burgeoning despair faster than Angelica's iron fist would have. "//Ranma, Phaeron, do you think there could be another way up? Or do you think you could just smash our way up?/"

//Maybe,/" Ranma answered. For some reason, Angelica could see she wasn't looking at Kasumi, whose pants and blouse combo were still wet, sticking to her body like a second skin. //Phaeron, did you scan the walls leading into the T junction, and what is your scanner telling you now about the floor above us?/"

//With the holes in the ceiling coming from where the water had been, I can tell you quite a bit. There is indeed an empty zone up there, with water still trickling in from elsewhere. My sensors can't detect where it's coming from; they only indicate it is coming from the sides of the T junction. Your idea that there could be a hidden stairwell there might have merit as well, as I was not scanning the walls any longer when we first reached the junction. I only began to do so again when I sent the ROGs up the stairs,/" Phaeron announced grudgingly. //That was a mistake on my part that I won't make again./"

While Angelica stared, bemused, Ranma left the group and headed back to the T junction, leaving her to question Kasumi about what was going on.

Soon, Phaeron scanned the wall and instantly found a narrow zone where nothing lay behind the stone. "Well, the size of that makes me more sanguine about the fact that I missed it the first time. Even someone like you, Ranma, will need to move sideways through that entry, if indeed it leads anywhere."

"We'll find out," Ranma said philosophically, moving forward once more, her feet splashing in the still trundling water. It hadn't risen beyond a bit above her ankles yet, but it was still coming in, and they both had to raise their voices to be heard, the sound of a waterfall coming from both sides.

Behind Ranma, the few Holfortians who could still move without too much pain were collecting small, silver-scaled fish and putting them in their expanded pouches, just in case they needed more food in the future. There was a light rumble from ahead of them, and all of them flinched, but then the redhead's voice reached them, with seemingly good news if Kasumi's sigh of relief was any indication. //Found it!/"

The staircase Ranma found was very narrow, the stairs themselves almost more like shelves. As the others got moving behind her, Ranma ascended them easily, reflecting that the majority of the group would probably find that difficult given their wounds.

Coming up the stairs, Ranma found herself in a circular area with stone walls, none of the cavern-like look from the previous two floors in sight. As Ranma stood there, she heard the sound of buzzing from on high, and Ranma realized she'd come up into a wasp nest. "Well, crap."

Ducking back down, Ranma reconvened with the others, finding that Phaeron had ordered the ROGs forward. "Huh, those weren't shorted out by the water?"

"Be serious, buffoon. They are made for combat, and were modern by the standards of my time. Being underwater or even the damage they sustained in the tumult has only reduced their combat effectiveness by a mean of fifteen percent," Phaeron huffed.

Snorting at that, Ranma looked over at Angelica, then pulled out the teakettle from her ki space, filling it with the water swirling around their feet. Holding it out to the blonde woman, Ranma gave her a pleading expression. "//Er, please miss, can I have some hot water?//"

This made Angelica chuckle, but take the teakettle, heating it quickly. "//A part of me thinks I should just let you suffer in that form for a bit, given what happened earlier, but that would be most churlish of me, given how much help you've given us but please, tell us what you found.//"

With that, she pointed at Ranma and then up the stairs, cocking her head to one side in question. "//I'm afraid, given the battering we've taken, few of us will be of much help going forward."

That didn't matter, not for this first fight, anyway. Ranma charged back up the stairs, getting the attention of the wasps by beginning to jump and climb up the nest area. Meanwhile, the able-bodied, Kasumi and Angelica among them, helped the ROGS up the stairs, then they, along with the magic users, began to attack the wasps from below as they concentrated on Ranma.

For some reason, all their concentration remained on Ranma, the 'flying' threat. Better, there were also not nearly as many wasps as there had been in the initial area like this that Ranma had discovered with Kasumi. Soon, this nest's queen fell, half its body smashed to pieces by Ranma, as the last of its guards died to precise fire from below.

Similar to the battle below, this fight also produced a treasure chest. This one was much smaller, and with what looks like a very familiar item from many games, although those games were not at all connected to the reverse harem game of Alto Liebe. "...Is that a Pokédex?" Ranma demanded deadpan, staring at it.

Hovering above him, Phaeron shook his head. "It certainly is not! It is a scanner, a weaker, handheld version of my own scanning equipment. It could be somewhat useful, and is undoubtedly solar-powered, but isn't all that special to me. Still, to these primitive New Humans I wager it would be most impressive."

"Which might make sense if we're making our way up. The goods we find will become less and less interesting as we go," Ranma murmured, taking it, then bouncing his way back down to the others. He handed the scanner over to Kasumi.

She took it politely, looking at it, then shrugging and handing it back to him. "Phaeron, will cold temperatures bother it?"

"Not at all. So long as it is no longer powered up, nothing will bother it," Phaeron answered, watching as Ranma stuck it into his item space. "Seriously, that is far too magical, much like the rest of these people's bags of holding or what you have. Stop it, you heathen."

Rolling his eyes at that, Ranma waved grandly to the only other entrance into the wasp nest as he addressed Angelica. "//Shall we?/"

Rolling her eyes and yet smiling a little bit at how Ranma was still dealing with this dungeon as if it was just as much fun as it was dangerous, Angelica gestured, and the group got moving again, albeit far, far slower than before.

Despite how slow they were, the group soon came upon a sight that Angelica and all the others with her recognized, and they began to shout with joy. Weary fists pumped in the air, and shouts of delight resounded, causing Ranma and Kasumi to look confused for a second.

Ahead of them was a massive chasm, a hole in the floor of the dungeon that was at least thirty yards across from one end to another and covering the two walls, cutting off the two sides of the tunnel from one another entirely. Normally, someone would not have looked at that and been enthusiastic or happy, but the tunnels they were in and those they could see on the other side of that chasm were familiar to all of the Holfortians.

"This is it, the first floor," Angelica breathed in relief, gesturing around them, then to Kasumi and Ranma, raising a 'one' in the air with triumph. "//We're close, so close! This is the first floor of the dungeon!/"

Nodding to Angelica, Kasumi was still a little bemused by this. "I think that means they recognize the area. But that still means we have to get across this. Ranma, I don't think even you could leap across that distance."

"I could with a run-up, but... hmmm..." Kasumi suddenly whooped as Ranma picked her up, humming thoughtfully to himself before setting her down, then racing forward, basically bouncing from one end of the tunnel to the other all the way across to the other side. This drew

gasps and shouts of astonishment, despite the locals having seen Ranma do many amazing things up to this point.

He landed on the far side, humming thoughtfully, looking around, then doubled back. "Well, I think I can get us across, but only if I carry everyone one or at best two at a time across."

Kasumi's eyes narrowed dangerously. "Ranma, did you just try to test my weight to see if you could do that with me? Is that your way of telling me I'm fat?"

"How the heck... no, it isn't!" Ranma waved his arms to either side frantically, a sight that caused the people around them to chortle even if they couldn't follow the pair's conversation. "I wanted to make sure I could get you across. That's got nothing to do with your weight, Kasumi; it's just that you'd probably react better with me lifting you up than any of the others. And if I get you across, they're more likely to accept that I can get all of them."

"Ask next time, then," Kasumi mock-grumbled, shaking her head. She looked at Angelica, then mimed Ranma's passage with her fingers, pointing to herself, and hopping into the air a little, as if trying to explain that Ranma would be carrying her across.

"//Hang on! What's to stop the two of them from just leaving us here?//" Carmen questioned, glowering at Ranma. "//There's no way we could get across without him, and they've shown a callousness towards those doglike creatures that if they leave those behind, it's no sign they'll come back.//"

Angelica glared at Carmen, then shrugged and gestured to Gregar. "//Carry Gregar across first Ranma,//" she ordered.

Ranma glanced between them, but understood what Angelica wanted. Turning around, he knelt down, gesturing to his back. Gregar grumbled a little, but climbed aboard, and after hopping in place a few times, Ranma charged towards the gulf ahead of them.

The others all watched with bated breath, as he leapt to the side, bouncing off the tunnel wall, then again and again, five times rather than the three he'd needed before to get cross-cut to the other side. Yet he still arrived on the other hand without mishap.

When he deposited Gregar, the other youth went to his hands and knees, shaking a little. "Damn, that is the most terrifying thing I've ever done!"

Ranma waited with him for a few moments, letting Gregar get his brain back together, pushing to his feet and pulling out his sword. He'd lost his rifle in the water trap, smashed to pieces. He pointed back the way they came and gestured for some of the ROGS to be brought over, which made good sense in Ranma's mind.

He was able to carry two of them across each, then Carmen and one of the other, least injured magical fighters, carrying both of them over his shoulders, one to a shoulder, despite their shrieks and howls of protests at being treated in such a fashion.

Having gotten used to it by this point, the trip was a little easier for Ranma, but he made certain to ask Phaeron when he came back after depositing those two to keep a scan going on both walls. "I'm still uncertain how alive the dungeon is, and if it feels we're close to getting out of here without any of us dying, it might start to take offense."

"I've told you before that dungeons are not, technically speaking, alive as you would understand the term. They were a known, sadly spreading phenomenon during the war. But your caution is acceptable. Especially since this chasm greatly resembles something you would think that a demonic monstrosity or tentacled creature could crawl out of," Phaeron said snarkily.

With that, Phaeron moved to hover directly where the floor would be in the chasm, scanning upwards into either side and all around just in case.

"I **sooo** didn't need that image, darn it," Kasumi muttered, watching as Ranma took Michelo, then came back for several of the wounded, carrying them over one at a time in his arms rather than over his shoulder, making for a much less harrowing journey. This included Ariel and the last of the boys, before Kasumi's turn came up.

She blushed a little bit, feeling Ranma pulling her against his chest, wondering idly if this was what Akane felt whenever Ranma was roof hopping with her. *If so, why in the world did you object to it all the time, little sister? There is such a thing as too much pride, especially if you're missing a good thing like this. No, stop it, Kasumi, this is just a means to an end. You want to go home, and Ranma is Akane's fiancé!*

By the time that thought was percolating through her brain, Kasumi found they were already across, and she was being set down gently on her feet, leaving only two of the ROGS, Angelica, and one of the least injured girls. Angelica gestured for Ranma to carry the others over first, staring back the way they came, sword in hand. As a Rapha, it behooved her to make certain that all of her people were seen first before seeing to herself.

Luckily, no monsters appeared, and soon Ranma was back, smirking at her. "//Your turn, Angelica.//"

Angelica blushed a little, as Ranma knelt in front of her, holding out his arms, allowing Angelica to step into them, whereupon he swept her up off her feet easily, as if she weighed no more than a child. That, despite all his efforts up to this point, amazed her. *It must be some kind of body-enhancing magic, mustn't it? Julius and Greg are powerful fellows, but the feats of strength and speed I've seen Ranma do make them pale in comparison.*

Soon, the two of them were crossing, joining the others. Gregar and some of the ROGS had already set off down the hallway, coming to the first intersection, where they stood watch, waiting for the rest to catch up. Angelica hurried in that direction, trying hard not to think of being carried like Ranma had a moment ago, wishing wistfully that Julius had been there to partake in this adventure with them. It would surely have brought the two of them closer.

Alas, the prince had bowed out of coming to her estate, citing wanting to spend the weekend with his friends instead. That had hurt at the time. That her intended would want to be with Jilk and the rest of his childhood friends rather than be with her. That Angelica didn't count as a friend to the prince.

Despite that, it hadn't dissuaded Angelica from coming on this expedition, something she regretted now. *First, Kellerman and Klaus, with Stephen and Melissa left behind, who knows what has happened to them? I hope they are still waiting, or perhaps headed back to the Adventurer's Guild to bring back help. Then Lester, Robespierre, Alicia, and Valeri dying in the fight against the stone golem and the monster hoard. And the rest of us only survived to this point only thanks to Ranma and Kasumi's skills. Not a great attempt on my part to get in touch with my adventurer ancestors.*

Hearing Carmen complaining about her back and mutter about how different Ranma treated them all, Angelica felt her introspection turning sour. *Although, at least I have done better than my companions, and I know their true mettle now, that was... an expensive lesson, but a good one. And if any of my fellow nobles even try to claim ownership of Phaeron or the... the 'fabber' I think they call it, I am going to come down on them like the hand of a fiery God,* she thought, before shaking her head and nodding to Gregar. "I don't suppose you know the way back to the entrance off the top of your head?"

"Afraid not, milady." Gregar shook his head. "I do remember this rightmost fork being a dead end, and us coming straight onto the pit trap, though."

That was enough to get them started, and with Ranma, Angelica and Gregar in the lead, with the ROGS mostly positioned at the far back and one with Kasumi in the center, they made their way down the hallway. Twice, they had to double back and were ambushed by a group of rats and ant monsters, but it was clear this was indeed the first floor, given its difficulty. The monsters here were far weaker, dying easily to magic and the few remaining rifles before Ranma could charge into combat.

Better from Ranma's perspective, some of Kasumi's doldrums had disappeared. She was now looking around, smiling faintly. "I think we're almost out, Ranma," she explained as they rested at one point, a regular necessity with the heavy number of wounded. "Given how excited everyone else is, and what we have been able to discover about their story so far. Better, I think I can feel a light breeze occasionally."

Ranma blinked, then pulled out a handkerchief. Holding it lightly, he watched and nodded as it started to shift. "You're right. We're close, although with the twists and turns in this place I still can't get a direction."

A few offshoots later, the group noticed that the way forward was getting wider. Minutes after that, as they exited one cavern into another, Gregar whooped, pointing ahead. "Look, there's the entrance!"

That caused shouts of joy to go up, and the few still able-legged (not able-bodied) members of Angelica's group raced past Gregar towards the open area. Kasumi was hard-pressed to not join them, especially when she caught a glimpse of what had to be some kind of forest standing near the entryway, sunlight gleaming down from on high.

She held back, though, thinking it immature to rush ahead like that. This was a very good thing, because when the first of the teens raced into view from the wider world beyond, everything went wrong.

"Warning! Large object moving outside!" Phaeron shouted suddenly, causing Ranma to pause from where he had also been moving forward, Phaeron's next words galvanizing him into action. "Detecting multiple heat signatures and what looks like multiple people armed with magical weapons moving out there!"

Deciding to err on the side of caution, Ranma pulled out the last bit of rope he still had from what he and Kasumi had gathered in Phaeron's base, flinging it out to entangle the legs of the three in the lead. Luckily, everyone had already stopped to turn and look back at Phaeron's sudden warning, having gotten used to it. This allowed Ranma's rope to tangle their legs, and as a loud thrum reverberated from outside, Ranma yanked the rope, knocking the legs out from under all three.

However, this didn't save everyone and Angelica watched in shock as the Baroness Rebecca Almain, one of the most strident in her disdain for the men among them, who had routinely complained about everything since the pit trap under her breath, flailed as bolts of plasma caught her even as she was knocked off her feet, removing her head and much of her side. Duncan, one of the more cowardly menfolk among her companions, whose sword skills had proven far less than he had bragged about, died, his chest was just gone along with one of his thighs, leaving the rest of him to fall, smoking to the ground.

For a moment, even Ranma was stunned at the sudden violence. He was used to violence, but most of the violence he'd faced was the martial arts type, and he had rarely ever seen anyone be just torn apart like that by gunfire. The only time he'd seen anything like that was, when he and his father had been involved in a few very nasty fights against Triad and Yakuza types before coming to Nerima. He'd even engaged in one such fight after, involving a particularly stupid group of Yaks trying to use Nerima as a courier point for drugs and guns.

It had been one of the few times that he and Kuno had fought on the same side, along with Happy and Cologne. Seeing those old farts in serious mode had been interesting... in the Chinese curse kind of way. Those fights had ended with dead bodies around the place; yet, while the oldsters had carried the main fight, Ranma knew that at least a few of them had been from him, just like there had been a few dead in the fights with his father years before.

So Ranma was used to the idea of death and how deadly guns could be against normal people, removed from the normal martial arts world. But to see two people cut down like that so suddenly, so quickly, caused him to freeze before he snarled, and his mind started ticking over once more. "Fucking bastards!" he roared, charging forward, leaping up and bouncing off the wall before clinging to the ceiling, running along it for a second.

For her part, Kasumi simply stared. It was all she could do to not faint, and she found herself still slumping against the wall, not protesting as several of the ROGS began to pull her back into cover away from the dungeon entrance. Even after all the violence she'd seen in the dungeon, the broken bones, bruises and gashes she'd dealt with among Angelica's people, seeing two of them cut down like that horrified her to the point she wasn't tracking her surroundings for a moment. Several others did, both men and women shivering or screaming at the sight of their companion's bodies.

While Phaeron lamented the use of his ROGs, as pulling New Humans into safety was enough to want him to scrap them all for fear of contagions, Angelica had stopped and rolled into cover quickly and was now staring beyond the dungeon's entryway. While the others were all shouting about what was going on, whether or not it was bandits, pirates or something similar, she knew with a sudden cold certainty that this was a final portion of the trap this whole trip had turned out to be.

Her supposition on that score was now cold, hard certainty. Whoever had set this up, whoever had manufactured the reports about this dungeon being far less dangerous than it had been, had not left anything to chance. *Now I feel twice the fool for wanting to go on this expedition, but who is behind it, and why!?*

Shaking that thought off, Angelica wondered what to do now, staring down at her hand, then her sword at her side. That had been Knight Armor-grade weapons fire, meaning an Armor was out there. There was very little her magic could do against such as that. *Unless I can make it so hot that the pilot starts to have trouble piloting... wait, what's Ranma doing!?*

To her astonishment, Ranma leaped down from on high and to the side, somehow avoiding all the heavy caliber fire, rolling under a series of bolts that came so close they nearly nicked his hair. As she watched, he then kicked up off the ground, dodging to one side out of sight around the edge of the entry as more fire hit where he had been about to finish his roll.

As he did, a voice, male and very angry, shouted, "Dammit, Carlos! I told you, you had to wait until they were all outside the dungeon! What are we going to do if they retreat inside? We only get paid if we bring the Redgrave bitch's body back!"

"Please, you think we're going to get the other half of our pay? You know they're going to just wipe us out, so there's no loose ends!" a second voice retorted, his voice boosted by an Armor's external speakers far louder than the first voice had been. While Angelica could only mentally note that the second voice, as it was almost certainly correct, she did not like the words spewing from the man's mouth, not at all. "No, we kill them all however we can, then we try to bring down the entrance to the dungeon. Bury their bodies inside and then get the hell out of Holfort."

That was a remarkably cold-blooded plan, and frankly, showed an equally remarkable lack of understanding of a dungeon. Many attempts had been made to destroy dungeon entrances before, but although the area there might look like simple stone and hard-packed earth, merging seamlessly with the surrounding area, it was a fact that the external area of a dungeon could not be penetrated or damaged by any means. The outer shell of a dungeon was so densely packed with magic that nothing could get through it.

The internal walls could be destroyed or changed, as the dungeon itself shifted over time, but not the exterior. Or else Ranma would never have been able to save the group, not once, but twice, from traps. No one was certain why, but everyone was happy about it, as it meant dungeons could not grow in size, only in deadliness over time.

Deciding that her wandering mind was probably due to shock, Angelica very calmly slapped herself across the face, blinking as the pain hit her, before pushing herself to her knees, as shouts and yells of alarm from outside told her that Ranma must have closed with at least some of their ambushers. "Anyone who can move, help Kasumi's constructs to drag our fellows into cover," she roared, trying to put harshness into her tone rather than fear, using her anger, and finding it coming to her, cold and controlled.

That had been one of her first lessons from her father. "Do not get angry, rant or rave; shouts and histrionics serve no purpose. A controlled anger is far more deadly, like a magical blast of flame in comparison to a simple forest fire. Burn only what you want, only what you need to," her father had often told her.

Those lessons came back to her now, pushing her through the last bits of her shock as some of her followers obeyed, grabbing at their fellows and starting to drag them and themselves along the ground with the help of the doglike constructs, keeping low. Thankfully, Ranma had seemingly become the sole object of their attacker's attention. *He is remarkably good at that, isn't he?*

She moved over to Kasumi, seeing her in a near catatonic state, mentally noting that that probably meant she had never been near such violence before. Angelica gently slapped her

shoulder several times, getting Kasumi's attention, watching her hazel eyes flicker, then track to her, before gesturing to some of the doglike constructs and using her hands to try to explain what she wanted. "//Once everyone is under cover, push them out towards the entryway! Have them start firing at our attackers.//"

While Kasumi couldn't understand the words still, the gestures were enough, and she nodded convulsively. Seeing Gregar lying on the ground, his rifle pointed at the entrance, Angelica ordered, "Cover me and make certain everyone keeps their heads fucking down until I shout for magical assault!"

With that, Angelica also made her way forward, almost crawling on hands and knees as more stray shots came in from outside. Though, none of that was aimed fire and Angelica smiled grimly. *Yes, very, very good at taking people's attention.* With that, Angelica funneled her magic around one hand, ready to be released the moment she had a target.

Outside, Ranma had found himself facing one of the giant Armors he had seen so often in the game. However, unlike most of those, this one had been painted brown and green camouflage. While that made it seem far more realistic than the bright, color-coded ones he had seen the 'capture targets' use, it also looked very haphazardly built, and was certainly wider in the shoulders than any of the ones that the capture targets had used, its shoulders almost built up like some characters he had seen in European tabletop games occasionally.

All that might indicate it was an older or more common model, but what really mattered to Ranma was the fact that it had a heavy machine gun in one hand. It looked almost like a magical version of the Ma Deuce. Ranma had seen several of them on a US military base at one point, when he and his father had gone there after hearing that the American marines had some interesting knife-fighting techniques.

They had, but they were all too simple and limited for the pair of them, made for people far slower and less durable. Placing bets on Ranma against marines in various physical contests had earned them both quite a bit of money, though, which had allowed them to then travel through China without needing to stop until well after they left Jusenkyo behind.

This thing's rate of fire was a little slower, but the bolts of energy it shot out were much the same size as the bullets of the Ma Deuce, and Ranma found himself hissing in pain as one of them came close to his shoulder even as he leaped aside from where he had been about to finish his roll. *Holy shit, so much for being immune to laser fire. I can't let that thing hit me, can't let myself take more hits than necessary. Fuck, it's just like fighting Saffron or Herb when they were spamming ki attacks, only worse.*

The Armor wasn't alone. Elsewhere, scattered around the area, were at least two dozen other attackers, all armed with magical rifles of some kind. They all matched what Michelo and a few of the others had used in the dungeon, though most of them had been broken in some fashion in the water trap.

Landing, Ranma once more leaped away with barely a light touch on the ground, wincing as some of those shots hit home, while the Armor was slower to turn around and fire on him again, although more because of reluctance from turning his attention away from the entryway than because he was actually that slow. Whatever the reason, it worked in Ranma's favor as he was able to weather several of their smaller caliber rounds and landed among three of the attackers.

Fists flashed out with bone-crushing force, and all three fell dead, skulls and chests caved in or shattered. After seeing two of the people he'd been traveling with killed, Ranma was in no mood to try to take prisoners.

This ain't martial arts, it isn't sparring any longer, treat these assholes like Yaks, Ranma thought, as he shoulder checked a fourth man who had just jumped forward to attack him with a sword. Ranma's charge hit him with his shoulder before the other man's sword was halfway out of his sheath, hurling him up into the air, where he was quite quickly perforated by the larger caliber magical rounds from the Armor. He didn't do so well as a shield, but Ranma was no longer where he had been a second ago, and more importantly, the flying body both took people's attention and shielded his movement for a brief second.

This allowed him to dart into another group of the attackers, four men who had been sharing a downed log as cover from the dungeon. This proved remarkably ineffective against someone attacking them from the side, and Ranma's first kick caught one of the men in the head hard enough to snap his neck like a dry twig, sending him hurtling into his fellows. Ranma then rolled to one side, putting both their bodies and the log between him and the Armor just as more fire came.

That fire wiped out that area with extreme prejudice, causing short, aborted screams of agony, while a voice cursed from somewhere nearby. *“//Carlos, check fire, you fucker! You just killed more of us than that pigtailed asshole ha!//”*

“//What the fuck is he!? How the hell is he moving that quickly? Some kind of magical enhancement? I thought those adventurers we killed were freaky, but this guy is worse//” Another voice shouted from another hiding place, as more small arms fire came Ranma's way, only to miss as he jumped up into the tree line, nearly disappearing.

“//Drive him into the open, let Carlos take him ou-AAIIIEEE//”

At that point, Angelica had reached the dungeon's entrance and was now blasting out with hands full of fire. These were not the small balls of plasma that she had used in the dungeon as her main spell of choice. Rather, tongues of flame lashed out from her hands as she pointed them in two directions at once, flamethrowers with narrow focus and even more heat and power. Not anywhere close as fast as the bolts of energy from the magical guns, they still crossed the intervening distance before any of her targets could retreat.

Five men screamed, as fire burst in among them, searing arms and legs into ash or setting them on fire. Those who died instantly to the flames were probably the lucky ones, as the others simply screamed and fell, trying to roll and put out the flames, only for their bodies to give out before they could, the pain being far too much for their brains and hearts to withstand.

This left only one group of attackers and the Armor, who twisted around, turning towards Angelica with its gun, only to hear a loud clicking noise. //Fuck, the energy crystal's out of power already. Cheap damn thing!//"

No longer firing, the Armor charging towards Angelica, its gun raised now like a primitive club, only for Ranma to slam into the Armor's side. Grabbing at the built-up shoulder armor for a second, he then began pummeling the metal behind and to the side of the Armor's head. "I don't think so, asshole!"

Ducking its shoulder and using thrusters built into its legs, the robot shifted sideways and into the air for a moment, tossing Ranma off, twisting around and lashing out with a punch before coming down to the ground. Ranma thought one of its thrusters, or whatever, had malfunctioned.

Disregarding that thought, Ranma flipped up and over the robotic fist, pushing off of it as if it were a punch from Pantyhose Taro. *This Armor is pretty much the same size as that idiot*, Ranma reflected, as he lashed out with a Moko Takabisha into the thing's head, only to see it do absolutely nothing, simply splashing there, not even creating a dent. *Not quite as fast, but more durable, drat it all.*

Ranma blows weren't doing much. He could barely feel the metal under his punches reacting at all, beyond when he snapped off some kind of radio antenna thing. The rest of his blows didn't seem to do any damage at all, although Ranma thought maybe one of them had indented the metal he hit where the neck of the robot met its head.

The next blow came, and instead of going upwards, Ranma pushed himself back down to the ground, where he rolled underneath the kick, and then twisted his body, bringing both of his fists up to pummel the interior side of the Armor's leg. "Have some Amaguriken!" he shouted, and there was a sound as if a horde of woodpeckers had begun to work on a metal panel.

This time, Ranma did a little better, only for the metal Knight's crotch to crash into his head with piledriver force as the driver did a squat right out of a certain shooter game Ranma had once played, attempting to crush Ranma underneath. His head ringing, Ranma pushed himself desperately to the side, avoiding being pinned to the ground with difficulty. *Damn, that hurt! It didn't break anything, but this thing has to be at least as heavy as three of the wrecking balls I used for the toughness training. I can't let it bring all that weight to bear again.*

Kicking himself off the ground, Ranma came back into the attack, trying to figure out where in the thing its controller was. *I am now really wishing I had watched those loading screen movies that showed that part!*

The visor didn't show anything inside, even as his fists smashed into it, but he did do damage now. The plastic, or whatever it was, cracked, then exploded under his blows, and Ranma tore out a lot of wires and a few weird crystal and bronze ball things, but this didn't seem to do much.

"//Fuck you, you bastard, that was my radar and range finder you just fucked with!//" a voice bellowed. "//That's going to take thousands of golds to get fixed. Luckily, I don't need it to kill your rabbit ass. Eat hot mana!//"

As Ranma dodged the downward slap of the Armor, panels on its shoulders opened up. Shots blasted out, causing Ranma to cry out in pain as he was impacted by it. Lower caliber than the magical version of a Ma Deuce the thing had been using previously, those bolts still hurt like blazes, although they hit more like small, very powerful ki blasts rather than lasers, impacting more than searing.

Worse, the momentum of them hitting him tossed Ranma backward, opening him up for a roundhouse blow from the Armor's gun barrel which crashed into Ranma's side, hurling him sideways into the mound above the dungeon entrance. The initial blow hurt, but not all that much, as while the Armor was strong, Ranma's toughness training was up to the task, if barely. The hit into the outer mound of the dungeon, however, hurt worse, as the stone there gave not at all in as he hit it, causing him to cry out in even more pain as he felt pain flaring through all of his arm and a bone in his arm, to his shock, giving. *The fuck is that mound made of!?*

He tumbled to the ground, landing and pushing off quickly, hoping that his ki healing would be up to healing that eventually, as his arm hung at his side, barely responding. But right now, he had to keep moving, as the Armor turned its attention onto Angelica, who had finished off the last group of attackers. She ducked into cover but screamed as several of the smaller caliber magical rounds still nearly hit her.

Ranma charged forward, trying to get behind the Armor again, only for it to turn, forcing him to leap to the side again and into a pine tree. Ranma grabbed a branch and hurled himself even further sideways as the trees erupted with fire from the Armor's shoulders again. A second later, it once more swept the side of its gun, shattering that tree, but by then, Ranma had already moved on.

As had Angelica. She pushed herself to the other side, forcing the Armor to twist this way and that, trying to get them both in its line of sight and failing. It could have pulled back, opened the range, but the driver didn't seem to think of that, for which Angelica was very grateful.

At that point, the ROGS finally emerged from the entryway and began firing on the Armor. Phaeron had been very reluctant to allow them to get that far away from Kasumi, but she eventually recovered her equilibrium enough to put her foot down. Unable to ignore his core programming to obey Old Humans, Phaeron had eventually acceded, sending them all forward at once.

Now, the ROGS opened fire. Their laser bolts slammed into portions of the Armor, searing through in places. However, they acted more like needles than actually bullets in this case, making holes but not doing much internal damage. Not unless they hit something vital, and Phaeron lacked any understanding of how the Armor worked.

“Well, if that is the way it’s going to be, Rapid fire!” Phaeron barked excitedly, sending an order to the ROGS at the same time. “Turn that New Human Mecha into trash!”

Soon, the side and one of its legs and arms looked like a sieve with extra small holes that just happened to be Armor’s limb. Yet none of those holes had hit anything important, they couldn’t get at the Armor’s cockpit in it’s chest with the arm on that side of the Armor in the way. Instead, the Armor turned and charged, smashing the ROGS into pieces with the barrel of its gun.

This opened it up to a blast of fire from Angelica, but the heat blast washed over the Armor doing nothing, but Ranma landed on its outstretched arm, his fists flashing down into the joint at the elbow. “Time to go for the hinges, you big bitch!”

Concentrating on a smaller point that was designed to allow for movement, Ranma’s fists broke through the outer armor of the joint and then punched into the joint, tearing out significant chunks of the wires and everything within. Despite the fact that the thing ran on magic, a lot of it looked quasi-electronic, except that instead of copper wiring, the wires were almost greenish in color and felt slimy to the touch, rather than tingly like a live wire.

With a whine, the large gun fell out of the Armor’s hand as its forearm flopped for a second in place, its fingers spasming.

However, as it did and Ranma leaped away, he was unable to raise his own battered arm in order to push off the Armor’s roundhouse blow as well as he should have. He felt his arm scream in response, causing him to hiss in pain as he was flung through the air, rolling into the forest as he did.

Angelica blasted the Armor again, this time aiming for the front of its head and chest as it turned. This time, as her fire washed over areas of the Armor that had been hit by the ROGS, it seemed to shudder for a moment, the fires doing more damage to its inside and to its already shattered visor area. However, the controller was still safe, and the shoulder casings opened again, revealing the smaller-caliber guns once more.

Angelica had a brief second to stare, knowing she was about to die, before a hurled tree trunk slammed into the Armor from the side. It staggered, its fire going wide, and Angelica raised both hands, slamming them together in a motion that almost reminded Ranma of the move from a certain manga as a blaze of fire erupted from her hands into the Armor's chest. *"//Take this!//"*

This time, the Armor backed away rapidly, kicking up dirt towards Angelica, who might well have died as the Armor's shoulder guns came back online with her as the target again, but then Ranma was hitting it, slamming into one of its legs, which it had moved slightly to get settled down again. Doing so caused him to cry out in pain as his shoulder and arm flared in agony again, but he kept moving. *"FUuuuuCK you!"*

The leg's actuators, having already been battered by his previous attacks and perforated by the ROGS lasers, started to fail. Yet the Armor's operator was fast enough to bring its fist down on the top of Ranma's head with such speed that Ranma couldn't dodge, some kind of purple magic coruscating through it.

Caught unable to roll with it, the blow caught him right at the junction of his already battered shoulder and neck, and Ranma's eyes flew wide as he gasped in agony as his collarbone broke. *The heell!?*

What had happened just then was, essentially, the power of a wrecking ball condensed into a small space, enhanced further by the magic of the Armor's emergency mana crystal as the operator was beginning to panic. It cut down on the half-life of the mana crystal by a lot, but coated the Armor's limbs in mana, enhancing its strikes to an incredible degree.

Even so, the Armor couldn't compensate for the momentum of Ranma's charge. Its other foot slipped in the torn-up mud around them, causing it to crash back first onto the ground just as Ranma staggered back.

Desperately, the operator shifted so that the Armor tried to sit up, but Ranma jumped upward, slamming down onto its chest at the same time Angelica hit it with a blast of fire. *"//Blazes, Ranma, get out of there!//"*

However, as hot as Angelica's fire was, it didn't bother Ranma. Even as the Armor operator blasted at him with its shoulder mounts and raised its working hand to grab at him, Ranma reached down, hissing as his broken collarbone flared in agony. Pushing his fingers into the holes that had been created there by the ROGS, he wrenched up and out with a roar, tore the chest plate of the Armor off and tossed it away. *"Come out of there, you asshole!"*

The Armor's fist slammed into Ranma's side, still magically enhanced, making it denser and far heavier. As it hit, Ranma felt his ribs go, and he couldn't fight the momentum of the strike, which hurled him away.

Yet the damage was done. The Operator's canopy had been torn off, leaving him visible, which he knew all too well. "//Oh, shit!//"

The operator quickly rolled his machine to one side, using his shoulder and back to shield himself from another blast of fire from Angelica. Yet this opened him up to Ranma, who had landed nearby. Despite his broken ribs and his shoulder literally ruined, Ranma pushed himself to his feet and charged back in. Ducking under a panic-stricken blow from the Knight's open palm that crashed into the ground behind him, Ranma got under the Armor even as the operator tried to twirl away.

He hopped up onto the bottom of the cockpit, reaching in with his good arm and instead of just punching him, tore the operator up and out, tossing him out onto the ground. There, the man scrambled for a sidearm before Angelica launched a small fireball at his feet. Her hands glowing with magic even as she fought to keep her eyes from closing in pain from all the magic she had been using, Angelica bared her teeth in fury at the pirate. "Surrender! Or learn why my family earned the name Redgrave as your fellows already have!"

Sensing that Angelica wanted to take this guy prisoner, Ranma hobbled over to them. The pirate seemed to hesitate for a moment, staring at Angelica, one hand hovering as if he was one of those quickdraw Westerners, estimating whether or not he could get his gun out in time. Before he could decide one way or another, a chop to the back of his head sent his eyes rolling up, as he slumped unconscious.

As he fell, Ranma and Angelica stared at one another. He then quirked a little, pain-filled smile, gesturing around him with the hand of his uninjured arm. "Quite a day, huh?"

While Ranma's actual words still evaded her understanding, Angelica could still understand the sentiment and smiled back wanly through the agony of her own brain trying to rebel against her. "//My father has always said that any fight you can walk away from is a good one, but right now, that silver lining is very small indeed.//"

She looked around, then waved a hand toward Gregar, who had just poked his head out of the dungeon. "Gregar, get the others out here, the, the able-bodied first. I realize there aren't many of us that word describes at this point, but at least the weapons of this lot are usable, and I'd prefer we were all in sight of one another and out of the dungeon regardless."

OOOOOOO

That worthy pilot turned out to not be their only prisoner. As the others slowly and very carefully exited the dungeon to join Ranma and Angelica outside, Angelica went around the dead. She soon found a symbol she recognized as coming from the Shadow Tigers, a small but well-known pirate/mercenary band. While doing so, she found two other survivors. One was alive... although given the state of his thigh and knee, he probably regretted it.

Another man had been similarly shielded by some of the falling debris from a tree and came out of the fight with only a few bruises. Unlike the other two, this one tried to make trouble, feigning unconsciousness while Angelica was going around the area. Later, when Kasumi came over to look at his wounds, he tried to take her captive, only to find himself suddenly thrown to the ground, his grip on her forearm having been broken with ease, and the breath knocked out of him before Kasumi's knee landed on the back of his neck, pressing his head down.

As she did so, there was actual glare on her features, a fact that had Ranma looking at Kasumi mock-warily. "Where the heck did that come from? Should I be checking you for horns? Has a local oni taken you over... again?"

"Mah, Ranma. Nothing like that. I simply don't like my friends being threatened," Kasumi replied, shaking her head. "And if you try to get up again for any reason, Ranma, I will be most cross."

"My legs don't bother me, it's just my arm and ribs," Ranma protested, but under Kasumi's suddenly glare, settled down again. *Damn... the wallflower is gone, long live Kasumi the glare-mistress... ehh, that doesn't sound right, I'll have to think up a better name. Ugh... although, I gotta admit she has a point about my not moving. I'm completely thrashed.*

Once the adrenaline wore off, and the cost of the battle in ki and broken bones hit, Ranma had been in a very bad way, and wasn't about to object to simply sitting and watching as the others went over the dead bodies and their own wounded. Now he was certain Kasumi wasn't in danger. Luckily, a lot of the pirates had some medical supplies on them, all purloined goods from a band of adventurers whose bodies Gregar found a few hundred yards away from the battle against the Shadow Tigers. Evidently, a band of nine adventurers had been sent out, probably to find out what had happened to Angelica's group, and they had been heavily laden with medical supplies, most of which Kasumi had put to work quickly.

The adventurers had been ambushed by the pirates in a rather bloody battle. The pirates had lost at least twice the number of pirates in that ambush as they had against Ranma and Angelica; and the buried, shattered remains of three Armors rested there, two completely destroyed, while the last had been buried, only its head visible above solid stone.

Ranma had waved off any medical aid beyond a sling, despite Angelica and Kasumi both trying to insist because he didn't need it. As much pain as he was in now, Ranma had taken so many beatings and broken bones over the years that his natural healing had begun to be enhanced by ki. Admittedly, he'd rarely needed to heal so many broken bones before, but he figured he should be good in a few days at most. *Huh, come to think of it, I wonder if I could push my healing speed to another level. I was able to push through the pain well enough, but healing mid-battle would be really cool.*

Unfortunately for Ranma, he had voiced his thoughts on that score aloud, and now continued despite a sudden chill from nearby. "With those Armors around, I might have to heal quicker. And hit harder, I wasn't exactly of much use against that thing until I figured out where its weak spots were, and the ROGS softened it up. But still, healing faster would be just as useful. Now, how to get myself hur..."

Ranma's musings trailed off as a shadow blocked out the sun. Looking up, he saw Kasumi suddenly glaring down at him and fought hard not to flinch too noticeably. "I heard that. I didn't say anything about the toughness training at the time, as I knew that was a genuine maneuver and Ryoga-kun had been put through it by Elder Cologne already. But letting yourself be at this hurt again in the future so that you can practice healing your body faster is **not** going to happen, or I will do something you will regret. Do I make myself clear!?"

Looking over at this from nearby, Angelica felt herself smiling despite her somber attitude at the injuries and the overall experience, taking in Ranma's completely cowed expression and wildly nodding head. *I'm not certain what went on there but that was certainly amusing. No, Kasumi is definitely not a menial of some kind.*

She looked up as a loud bugle call sounded from the air above. She stood, along with what few others had the energy to, staring upwards, watching as three Armors came into view from high above. They were followed by a cruiser, slowly trailing them down to the ground.

For a moment, everyone simply watched, knowing that if these were more pirates, they'd have to retreat into the dungeon, which would probably be a slow death for them all, even with Ranma and Kasumi's help. However, a moment later, the lead knight held up its lance, on which a pennant flew, and as the wind caught it, Angelica breathed a sigh of relief. "That's my family's crest! In fact, that might be my brother's personal Armor."

At her words, her followers all subsided, with whispers of thanks, prayers to the Saintess, and whoops of joy from them all, while Kasumi and Ranma looked on. The sudden good cheer was enough for them to calm down, but they still couldn't follow precisely what was going on.

A moment later, the first of the knights landed, as the other two began a slow spiraling patrol of the area. His hatch opened, and Gilbert, Angelica's older brother, leaped out, crossing the intervening distance and grabbing her up in a hug. "Angelica, thank the Saintess you're all right! When Father told me you were overdue, as was the adventurer group sent out to investigate, I feared the worst. We got here as fast as we could, but from our own territory, that wasn't all that quick! We'll have to stop on the way back, though. I might've ordered the cruiser's engines to be pushed too hard. They're in danger of giving out," Gilbert practically babbled in relief as Angelica clung to him, both showing more emotions than they would normally in public.

"Well, I certainly thank you for coming, brother mine. We're all in a bad way at the moment, thanks to these pirates and their last efforts to claim my life on top of everything else. Those that are still alive, anyway. I, I lost nearly half of my companions, Gilbert."

Gilbert stiffened, not having done a head count, but now worried about the political fallout from this. Angelica's next words, coming out in near snarl, her warm and fuzzy feelings at her brother's arrival giving way to cold fury, brought him back to the here and now. "We have prisoners, so hopefully we'll be able to get to the bottom of that conspiracy."

Narrowing his eyes dangerously, Gilbert stared at the prisoners. "Don't worry, we'll get all the information we can out of them. Father is already looking into the other side of things, how you learned about this dungeon, and who labeled it as a D-rank in the first place. I take it that the dungeon was the larger part of the trap?"

"It was. If not for my new companions, Ranma and Kasumi," Angelica pointed them out to her brother as she turned in his arms, then pointed to Phaeron and the fabber as she went on. "And what I believe now are Lost Items that they have discovered, we would've all been killed in the dungeon. This dungeon had far more traps and higher-level monsters in it than we had anticipated, and few of my followers were as completely prepared for even a simple dungeon as I had hoped them to be."

"There is more than one story involved there," Gilbert mused, staring thoughtfully at the badly wounded pigtailed youth, and then at the slightly older girl, perhaps only three years younger than himself, with the immensely gentle eyes and the graceful movements as she moved around the area, checking people's bandages.

My word, if I weren't a happily married man, that young lady would be hitting quite a few of my buttons right now. "There were two adventurers already in the dungeon when you arrived? We contacted the local guild, but they didn't tell us anything about that. Only about the rescue party they'd sent this way, which had also reported back in."

"We found their bodies nearby. Desecrated, and their items stolen. If you want, I think sending a group over there to recover the bodies would be a good idea."

"Once I have all of you up in the cruiser, that's the first thing I'll do. But Ranma and Kasumi? Odd names that. Are they foreigners?" Gilberts pressed.

"Very foreign," Angelica replied, allowing herself a little snicker. "They don't speak our language at all. We've been communicating, well, basically through charades. At times it's been frustrating, at times actually hilarious. But I repeat again, without the two of them and their Lost Items, we all would have met our end. We had all fallen into a trap that sent us dropping through six floors. My two guards were killed in an ambush by shadow monsters, and we were nearly overwhelmed by a hoard in one of the larger caverns. When my so-called friends and allies decided that it was every woman and man for himself and tried to escape. Only Gregor

and Michelo made no effort to do so, performing their duties incredibly well throughout this ordeal.”

“I wouldn’t be so hard on your followers, my dear. You are all only seventeen after all, and this was probably most of their first brush with real death. Still, we will go over it in greater detail with Father, and if action needs to be taken towards their families for their moment of cowardice despite everything that has happened since, he will be the one to decide.” Gilbert shook his head, before giving her a final squeeze and finally releasing his hold over her shoulders. “For now, let’s get you all ready for transport,” he ordered, as above them, the cruiser began to settle, crushing many of the trees under its bulk.

OOOOOOO

Ranma looked out a porthole to where Gilbert and Angelica spoke to some locals, while dock workers crawled over the exterior of the ship, installing two new engines. Or rather, the giant crystals out of which bronze-like funnels had somehow been grown that apparently served as engines here. They had already removed the older ones, and watching the work was pretty interesting.

Especially considering the dockyard in question, since that dock did not stick out into the water, but rather into the air. The whole edifice of the docks was made out of wood and stone, sticking out from the side of a cove on the island, where the dungeon had been. An island that itself floated in the air at a level that Phaeron told them equated to the height of Mount Everest. The birds that flew over these docks begging for scraps weren’t seagulls, but a bird with the beak of a gull, but the bodies of another bird that Phaeron mentioned. Around them, other ships docked, tied into nets rather than just ropes, those nets made of thick metal cables.

Ranma loved it, Kasumi not so much. He loved the idea of that much air all around him, and felt right at home in it. Indeed, he’d spent a while scuttling around the deck himself despite his ribs and arm, which were both already healing, as he thought they would. Kasumi, on the other hand, hated it. She wasn’t afraid of heights, but everything outside the flying ship, and the ship itself, was just another sign that they were very much not in their own world, and how different this world was from their own.

Still, she kept those thoughts to herself for now, frowning just a little bit at a book that Angelica had sent off for, a children’s primer for the local language as Ranma looked outside, trying not to fidget too much in his Kasumi-imposed downtime. “Their engines being modular is kind of interesting, since I know back home fixing engines and so forth or is a big deal on planes and ships alike. But you still say that you could design something better?” he asked, turning to look over at Phaeron, who was hovering nearby.

“I did not say I could design such a device. I was an administrative AI programmed to assist with geological and mineralogical experiments and information gathering, along with my other duties around the laboratory. I do, however, have within my databanks the memory of

numerous ships that would make this one seems like a child's toy in comparison. A particularly retarded child, in point of fact. But then again, it was designed and is crewed by New Humans, so perhaps that should've been expected," Phaeron growled with his habitual hatred of all things New Human.

"And how long would it take you to build one?" Ranma taunted, grinning a little.

"Already looking to sail off into the wild blue yonder, Ranma? What would our new friends think?" Kasumi asked absent-mindedly.

Heh, Kasumi's snark and repartee are getting better all the time, Ranma snickered internally before answering. "Nah, but I love the idea of having my own airship. Even more than I think, having one of those Armors might be interesting. But since I'm not magical, and Phaeron said that the one we examined probably wouldn't have worked for someone without magic, meaning most of them probably won't, an airship seems the best idea."

"Unfortunately, and it is indeed most unfortunate in this case, I am afraid I must, as the phrase goes, burst your bubble on this point. The fabbers we brought with us would only be able to work on even small segments of such a creation. Mind you, if we go back into the dungeon and we can remove some of the construction droids in storage in my complex and get them reprogrammed, that is more of a possibility, but the actual construction would still take months."

Phaeron's drone shook from side to side as if shaking a nonexistent head. "If we could find all the material necessary. Which, considering that these New Humans' basic metallurgy and so forth are very different from what we would need, is something I cannot speculate about a time frame just yet."

"And what about your espionage activities?" Kasumi looked up, finally setting aside the primer, shaking her head. "Were you able to sneak into the local library and copy the books there as you wanted to?"

That had gone on late last night, while this morning, Angelica had taken most of her companions to a local doctor to make sure that no further injuries had been hidden up to this point. After that, those who had still been able to walk around without pain had been taken on a bit of a shopping spree by the young heiress, which meant that Kasumi was now the proud owner of several fascinating dresses, one of which she was wearing now.

Ranma had gotten a few outfits similar to what he usually wore, refusing any and all attempts to make him conform to local fashion. As he told Kasumi, "I wasn't going to wear a uniform at school, why would I wear the local clothing here? Especially when they have silk."

He'd even attempted to pay for his and Kasumi's goods with some of the stuff they'd gotten from the dungeon, but Angelica had flatly refused, standing in between them and the

cash register at the time with a thunderous expression. That had completely cowed Ranma, while Kasumi had still tried to fight a little bit longer, their conversation in body language and hand gestures drawing several looks of confusion from the other shoppers, but Angelica eventually won through.

"It went quite well. I found numerous maps of this nation, as well as a few for the surrounding territories. Unfortunately, a lot of that information matches what you told me about the geography of the world from your game that it so resembles," Phaeron grumbled, drooping in midair. "There are no more continents on this planet. Rather, there are thousands of scattered islands, with the largest being the central hub of the local polity, in this case, the local nation. The closest to a continent there is, is the Holy Land, the island of which is around the size of old Australia."

"Only hopefully not nearly as deadly to its inhabitants," Ranma drawled, to which even Phaeron had to let loose with an electronic chuckle, his mood shifting.

"Indeed. The Miasma Sea that has replaced the planet's actual surface is indeed accurate with what you told me about the game, Mistress, which is phenomenally depressing to me personally, given the remit of the science station I was designed to be the central computer for. Hopefully, some way of decreasing the ambient magic within to the point where it can be siphoned off or removed will become viable in the future."

"Setting aside such grandiose plans, what about the local language?" Kasumi inquired. "Are you in a position to start translating for us?"

"If I had the fabber create some kind of additional module for myself in order to write, we could communicate in the written language right now. The spoken language is still going to take me a little while longer, but with a larger sample and the written language to work with, I estimate I'll finish that work in another day or less. Certain terms, local colloquialisms, and simple vocabulary remain to be built up to an acceptable level."

"That's good. Angelica and Gilbert haven't tried to mime the idea of a translation spell or anything like that, so either that kind of thing doesn't exist any longer or is very rare," Ranma said.

"Indeed, but remember, Ranma, eventually we'll have to learn the local language one way or another. Don't think you can get out of studying for it," Kasumi warned jokingly.

"Damn it, and here I thought I'd left books and that kind of thing behind," Ranma grumbled, his tone telling Kasumi he was serious.

"Hah! No. No, you never will. Unless, of course, you do want to stop improving yourself, Ranma, and that would be foolish and rather close-minded."

Ranma was about to retort that if it wasn't improving himself in the Art, he wasn't interested, but the look on Kasumi's face told him he would disappoint her mightily if he said that, so he simply sighed and looked down at the book she had been reading. "So, how good is that little book of theirs? And do you want me to look around for anything in particular, while we're still in dock? I think that were supposed to leave mid-afternoon."

OOOOOOO

Leaning back in his chair, Duke Redgrave gazed thoughtfully at his daughter, who had gone off on an adventure and come back a very more centered and experienced young woman than he had ever hoped she would from her first dungeon delve. Hence why he had taken the first fifteen minutes after Angelica had gotten home and they had gotten out of the public eye to hug the stuffing out of the girl. Now, after listening to a very concise and well-thought-out report, he understood the depths of the straits that she'd found herself in and that only luck had allowed her to escape alive.

"The prisoners you took have yet to talk, although Cordelia has been able to discover the individual who mentioned this particular dungeon to you and is now tracing the money, he received for doing so, back. The Adventurer's Guild has yet to own up to whoever mislabeled that dungeon on their maps or ours, but I believe it is only a matter of time before the Guild itself deals with them. I've requested they hand the perpetrator over to us, but I doubt that's going to happen. However, I **have** extracted a promise from them to share any and all information with us if it arrives. For now, that's all that we can do on that end. The prisoners, though, will talk eventually. I've already sent off a request from the crown for some... practiced individuals in the realm of getting answers from such."

Angelica shivered, never having been at home with what she occasionally called the 'Marmoraria side of things' mentally. She understood why a nation needed an espionage service and why such a service needed to do dishonorable things, but Angelica had never liked it... and, frankly, Jilk had always annoyed her, despite how close he was to Julius.

Knowing that, Vince changed the subject a bit. "Speaking of, I sent a message to the queen about what had happened. She and the prince both want you to go to the capital in the near future to tell them all about it in person. Unfortunately, Julius is busy with his lessons in Seberg territory, and the queen obviously can't leave the capital, no matter how much she might wish for."

The mention of Julius being worried about her made Angelica smile a bit, but her happiness at that idea was marred by the memory of his turning down her offer to go on this adventure with her. Still, she nodded and agreed to journey to the capital, as was expected of her. *And even if the prince isn't there, at least I should be able to see the queen and Clarice, which is always nice. So long as she stops mentioning how well I fit into that maid outfit, anyway.*

“Turning back to what to do about your adventure, I will be rewarding Michelo and Gregar for going above and beyond their line of duty. They will not need to buy their own Armors, nor their own equipment and weapons, as I will be taking them into our service formally. Both families will be repaid handsomely for that service, but they have siblings, so there shouldn’t be any issues with succession. I have also already cut orders to start investing in their territories. Although I will be watching such very closely,” Vince added as an afterthought, musing about what he knew about some of the practices of the ladies who ran those two particular baronies.

Or at least, they were supposed to be running them. Since both women were in the capital, Vincent rather doubted they had much to do with the daily running of their territories. They were also both known to be somewhat hedonistic, and that wasn’t exactly something he was going to allow his own resources to be used for.

“And the others, Father?” Angelica inquired, grateful that those two would be rewarded, but knowing about the political side of this would be most annoying to deal with.

“Stephen Fou Barner and Melissa Fia Altermer were found by the Adventurer’s Guild in the forest soon after you all left Fontaine. They won’t be rewarded or penalized as they were trying to get back to the town and summon help, only to get horribly lost doing it. Foolish, but at least they were trying.”

“Thank the Saintess, they survived. I was worried about them even after we didn’t find any sign of the pair in the area around the dungeon,” Angelica breathed out.

“As for the rest of your followers, I understand that they did not perform as well as they ought, but all of them will be rewarded and lauded for standing with you in such a trying trial, although not nearly as much. That, and some carefully couched words to their parents about loyalty, along with telling them about how poorly they truly performed, will be all we can do officially. As Gilbert told you, these events were well beyond anything your group could have prepared for.” Vince fell silent, staring at his daughter thoughtfully after seeing her face lock down a bit. “You object to that.”

At his flat statement, Angelica nodded firmly. “I understand the politics of what you are saying, Father; however, I no longer wish to associate with any of the group who survived the ordeal in the dungeon on a personal level, bar Michelo and Gregar. I understand your point about how Carmen, Ariel and the rest could not have been prepared for this, but their actions after meeting with Ranma and Kasumi speak almost as loudly as their fleeing and leaving me to die against the stone golem and the horde of monsters.”

She shook her head. “While I know they could not have been prepared for a real life-or-death situation, they still fled, leaving me to die. I cannot forget that. Worse, I cannot help but think that their mentality at that point was a true reflection of their character. How can I trust them to do what their rank and responsibility would demand of them in the future after this?”

While somewhat childish in her view, those words did ring with a certain amount of truth, and Vince nodded. "Very well. We will add to our messages to their families that their children are no longer expected to associate with you and we would prefer they do not. That will add a good deal of impact to our missives."

He frowned then, shaking his head. "The only two of them I would insist you keep associating with are Ariel and Carmen. They need not act as your friends or confidantes any longer, of course. But politically speaking, their families are too important for us to allow you to cut all social ties with them."

When Angelica nodded very reluctantly but formally, Vince allowed himself to smile at her. "In a way, I am glad that you discovered the true fiber of your companions now, Angelica. This lets you have four months before the Academy opens to look for other followers to gather into your own bloc. Do not concern yourself with the affairs of our family's faction as a whole. Simply look for those you think you could eventually become friends with, or at least strong acquaintances, going forward, people you can trust to watch your back. Formal alliances and so forth can happen after."

"Thank you, Father. I think I know where to begin on that journey, even setting aside Ranma and Kasumi." Angelica bit her lip. "I, I hope the two of them will also be rewarded for their efforts? It wouldn't be the first time a foreign adventurer has been gifted with a noble title, after all. And if so, I could see the pair of them becoming the core of any new clique I create."

"I'm certain the Queen will accept the necessity; particularly given how many Lost Items they came out of that dungeon with. The 'Fabber' as you call it, would be worth a barony, along with the golems that it can create," Duke Redgrave nodded thoughtfully, even as the unusual, foreign-sounding word rolled off his tongue. "However, before anything else, I wish to get the measure of these foreigners. And I want them both to be able to communicate with us verbally rather than through hand gestures and charades before we reward them so handsomely."

Angelica allowed herself a little giggle, nodding, as the droll tone of her father tickled her sense of humor something fierce. "I believe that Phaeron, the Lost Item that acts as their aid or go-between with the combat constructs, is almost to the point where it will be able to translate for them. At least judging from some of the conversations we had last night."

"Well, let us hope that he has finished that task then." Duke Redgrave was a little bemused by the idea of a Lost Item being able to do that, let alone seemingly control other Lost Items at the command of its finder, but it wouldn't exactly be entirely outside the realm of possibility. Regardless, he wasn't willing to let another day go by without talking to his daughter's two saviors, to get to know them and their motivations, where they came from, and so forth. Their language, as he had seen meeting them when his daughter and Gilbert first arrived back, was not one he was at all familiar with, despite some superficial hints that it might've come from Alzer. And since he knew the language of every nation around Holfort and many beyond, that was highly unusual. "Gustav, could you go get them, please?"

Moments later, Ranma, Phaeron, and Kasumi were led into the room. As they came in, Vince looked at them again, analyzing them as best he could where before he had set such aside to meet with his daughter.

Kasumi was easy enough to understand. She moved lightly on her feet, graceful and contained her eyes and body language showed far greater maturity than her physical age would suggest. She seemed passive, but there was a certain amount of intelligence in her gaze even as she curtsied formally toward Vince.

Her companion made no such motion, and his movements, while graceful, were not the same kind as Kasumi. Ranma moved not just with grace, but a smoothness and fluidity that reminded Vince of cats. He gazed at Gilbert and Vince, assessing them as physical threats, then dismissing them. Which, given his abilities, he thought was fair enough. He was a fighter, for certain, but his arrogance in not taking Vince's rank into account was telling on many levels, and somewhat annoying.

Setting aside such observations, Vince gestured for them to sit in two chairs in front of the desk behind which Duke Redgrave sat. Angelica had stood up and moved around the desk to stand beside her brother on his left side.

Kasumi looked up at Phaeron, smiling gently, while the three locals listened intently, understanding nothing. “//Phaeron, do you want to give your translation program a try? I think this is going to be a very serious conversation, and I think it is time for us to start establishing ourselves here as more than simple adventurers who helped save Angelica and her party.”

“//I can do so, Mistress.” With that, Phaeron, cutting out several obscenities, having to talk personally to these New Humans was grating on him, stared at Duke Redgrave with his one cyclopic eye and the translation matrix online, speaking up in the local language a few moments later. “I am Phaeron. I speak for the Mistress and Ranma. I can now understand your language. I will translate for them into your language and vice vices.”

Duke Redgrave steepled its fingers, staring thoughtfully at the globe for a moment, then saying, “It is a vice versa, not vices, I believe,” Vince hummed, nodding his head even as he made that minor correction. “Still, that is good enough to get on with. Excellent.”

Vince turned his gaze down to Ranma and Kasumi. “I have been told by my daughter about your rescue of her, how you came from deeper in the dungeons, and linked up with her group. I am fully willing to acknowledge my family's debts to you, but I want to know more about the two people we are so indebted to. What are your goals for being here in Holfort? Is it, as my daughter suggests, a search for a cure for the curse on you, young man? But why were you not known to the local Adventurers Guild? Questions abound, and I wish to know the answers.”

As Phaeron finished translating, Ranma glanced over Kasumi, who had predicted this kind of talk, shrugging his shoulders. "You were right. Now, how much do we tell them?"

"I think we will keep it as simple as possible. We are from a faraway land and were sent into the dungeon via magical means by a demon. Let us keep the idea of being from an alternate dimension entirely to ourselves for now. And whatever we do, don't mention the game. That we will keep a secret."

When Ranma just nodded and made a get on with a gesture, Kasumi sighed, realizing he meant for her to do most of the talking. *Then again, considering Ranma's general attitude and Phaeron's, that is for the best.* With that in mind, she ordered Phaeron to translate exactly what she was saying, adding no embellishments for his own part and began their tale.

End Chapter

Hope you all enjoyed this folks. I have decided to cut down on the whole new language type time in this fic. That will let me push on quicker to more Adventurer/type stuff. Anyway, I hope you enjoyed this. It was fun, and I think world building in this world will be great, but I am still of two very argumentative minds about adding it into the Ranma rotation.