

I can't draw.

Howdy, everybody. Woo... what a time it has been in the world since this was updated last. Thoughts and prayers go out to those families whose life has been effected by the horror of Hamas' barbarity and to those still fighting against the conqueror in Ukraine.

As to why you're seeing this fic updated? In an ASTONISHING upset, this work won the Ranma poll on my patty on account, thanks to the carryover effect. That means next month, Stallion will undoubtedly win since it will have the carry-over effect going for it for the first time. LOL. Hell, I bet if I put it up against Death's Avenger, my patty on only HP/World of Warcraft fic, it would win. But I digress.

This chapter is a bit of a segue chapter before the next arc begins, and as such, there isn't any real combat here, only character interaction and world-building. As well as hints for the future. Still, I hope you all enjoy it.

## **Chapter 16: Explosions are Easier than Emotions**

Ranma woke up to a semi-familiar sight the day after their return from the beach. He hadn't finished fully repairing (replacing, really) the outer wall of his room that Shampoo had smashed before her fight with Rias. This meant that he could look through a few of the wooden beams he'd put up down into the backyard. There, without fail, either he or Saeko, depending on who woke up first, could be found training. This morning was no different.

Below, Saeko held her bokken in both hands, thrusting forward before swinging around, one hand falling away from her sword hilt as the blade swung in an arc. Her legs came up in what looked like a hop but was actually a rabbit kick, her leg flashing out quick, then back in position under her body. Saeko flipped herself through the air, bokken thrusting in several directions as if facing multiple opponents before landing, her bokken disappearing as she upped her speed to the next level. Quick movements side-to-side accompanying an all-out assault, which abruptly shifted again as she put her spare hand on the ground, flipping up and into the air again, where Saeko seemed to dance in place, landing with a twirl as her bokken flashed around her.

"You know I can feel you watching Ranma. If you have time to watch, you could be a good boyfriend and come down and help you know," Saeko said, not stopping her katas.

Smirking, Ranma removed one wooden board and slipped through the hole this opened in his wall, dropping down to land lightly on a tree branch directly below his room. "I don't know. I could just sit here and watch you exercise for hours, Sachan. There's something mesmerizing about watching you move with a blade in your hand."

While the words were not the most romantic and the body language teasing, Ranma's tone of voice when he spoke the last sentence made Saeko shiver even as she moved into her next kata. Since becoming romantically involved with Ranma, Saeko had discovered there was a vast difference between being looked at by someone you loved and simple strangers. When she had practiced in front of boys and more women before, she had known the impact she had, had felt their lust for her, their awe. But such was crude or based solely on how 'pretty' she looked while practicing. Few understood how much Saeko had sweat and bled to get as good as she was.

Nevertheless, Ranma did. He knew because he had given even more of his life to the Art than her. Ranma knew the dark places in Saeko's soul and still respected her. Even more, Ranma still desired her, a mix of love, admiration and affection. For all her flaws and scars, he still thought her exercises beautiful. Moreover, for some reason, when he let her know that, it punched several of Saeko's buttons. "Thank you, Ran-chan."

Her next kata turned her body around away from Ranma as she moved into a fifth, one that Ranma had taught her that combined kendo with a Chinese sword style. Saeko did not turn around when she heard Ranma jump down. Saeko did not even stop when she felt Ranma moving into the kata behind her, his body mirroring her movements, his unarmed hands slipping over and under her own. She did not stop exercising even as her heart pounded in her chest far more than such simple katas could explain, hearing the rustle of their clothing as they moved, the sound of Ranma's own heart reaching her ears.

Only as the kata ended did Saeko turn, finding Ranma's arms around her waist. She leaned up quickly, her head tilted just so, and their lips met, the kiss soon deepening as the pair of martial artists lost interest in anything but one another.

Eventually, Saeko pulled back, a happy hum coming from her as she leaned her head against Ranma's chest. "Mmm... if we could somehow contrive to make every morning as nice as this one, I would be a most happy woman."

"Heh, I'll see what I can do." Ranma smiled at that, then remembered what he had been doing on the family laptop last night that had kept him up so late. *Shit! Rias and the training trip.* "Er, actually, speaking of martial arts and, um, romance, I--"

What Ranma might have said was drowned out as his mother called from the kitchen, and both of them froze. "Breakfast's ready, you two. I know I want grandbabies, but I'm not about to let you miss both the most important meal of the day and school to do it."

Embarrassed at having been seen in what should have been a private moment, the two teens parted, barely able to look at one another. Saeko rapidly grabbed up her bokken, then rushed inside, while Ranma leaped up to his room to head to the bathroom. Any desire to speak to Saeko about the emotional pitfall that awaited him when it came to bringing up his 'discussion' with Rias to Saeko was gone now.

Forty minutes (ten minutes for a shower, twenty minutes of teasing, and ten of a somewhat calmer conversation) later, Ranma and the other members of the Saotome households were surprised when their breakfast was interrupted by the doorbell. Ranma stared towards it, shaking his head. "What is it with people interrupting breakfast?"

Kasumi, who was sitting closest to the door, got up to answer the door, only to blink in surprise to see the policewoman she had met at the party after the victory against the fallen angels standing outside. "Hello, Minami-san, isn't it?"

"That's right. And you're Kasumi. You helped make the food for the party. You didn't have anything to do with the drinks. Did you? Only both my partner and I aren't exactly used to being drunk, not so easily anyway and that knocked us out."

Kasumi giggled, shaking her head as though other woman mind falling down drunk for a moment. "No, I didn't have anything to do with the drinks. Although, I believe that they actually came from well... down below, you understand?" This euphemism was a sign of how at home with the idea that there were fallen angels, angels and devils out there that Kasumi was, which was in fact not at all. She understood they weren't human, but while that didn't bother Kasumi there was a vast difference between that and thinking that these beings, many of whom she'd had very pleasant conversations with, came originally from alternate dimensions where human souls were supposed to go after judgment.

*Then again, Asia, Gabriel, Irina and Xenovia are the only Christians I have ever met, so maybe I'm just wrong about that kind of thing?* Regardless, Kasumi wasn't about to bring it up, and asked politely why Rika was there.

The policewoman snorted. "That makes sense, I guess. But anyway, I'm here to speak to Ranma. Is he here?"

Wondering what this was about, Kasumi allowed Rika in, leading her into the kitchen. "If you want some food, I'm afraid you should have called ahead, but if you just want to talk, we're nearly done eating."

Normally they would have more food on hand, but they hadn't gone shopping since the party, which had eaten into their reserves as well as those that Rias and the others had brought.

Rika shook her head. "That's fine. Hopefully this won't take long. I'm just the delivery woman. Ranma this contract's for you."

She held out a sheet of papers to Ranma, who took it with all the enthusiasm of someone about to handle a scorpion. "And this is? Because if it has anything to do with the damages my old man's caused, or any money owed because of him or me when we were on the road together, I'm going to toss it into the fireplace."

"We don't have a fireplace," Asia said confused.

"I will build one, and then throw it in. Because that kind of thing would be best used as kindling," Ranma answered grimly.

"No no, nothing like that." Rika smirked, shaking her head. "I understand that the last thing most people want is for someone to hand them official government documents like that. But this is good news, especially for you, Ranma. This is a contract to employ you full-time, as part of a new anti-spiritual world team the government wants to put together. A full time job," Rika repeated. "One that could start as early as today."

"Huh... okay, that sounds good, hopefully the pay matches..." Ranma mumbled, looking through the paperwork. He was no expert at paperwork, but he understood enough about contracts, having been taken advantage of by Nabiki and even his Pops a few times. He knew what to look for in terms of the bottom line, although he certainly wasn't going to sign anything right away, even if a part of him was ecstatic at what this paperwork seems to offer him. *No more freaking school! Face it Ranma, if they're not asking you to sign over your mortal soul, sperm, or something equally horrifying, the details really don't matter, do they?*

The idea of sperm had popped into his head there thanks to a conversation he'd had with Issei, Saji and Kiba at the beach for a few moments about how many problems his old man had caused him. Saji had stated that maybe offering to just do the deed with each of the girls so that they could family line without getting married thing might work. Moreover, seeing Ranma's disgusted face at the time, Issei had been more than willing to pile on, saying he might be able to just sell his sperm to them instead. It made no sense of course, but that hadn't been the point. The point had been the horrified face Ranma had made at both suggestions.

Ranma had paid both boys back by hurling them into the water so hard they skipped like stones across the surface a few times.

Not everyone at the table was happy about this. Asia was upset as this sounded like something that would get in the way of spending time with her big brother figure, while Nodoka was incensed at what this could mean for her plans for her son. "What do you mean the government wants to employ him full-time? I'm pleased to hear that Ranma will have a job, but surely, he needs to finish his high school education first!"

"Not for this kind of job. Ranma's not going to be put in a position of leadership or anything like that. He'll be more of a trainer than anything else, which is the part that could start today if you want it, Ranma, as well as a field operative. And in that area, your son already has all the skill he needs." Unlike Ranma, who had flinched at his mother's strident tone, Rika took her anger calmly. "Really, is your son learning anything he really needs to at school?"

Ranma looked reluctant at that, flinching a bit as Saeko, Asia and his mother all looked at him. "... I can already speak two foreign languages, I know a lot about geography and stuff like

that. I know enough math to get by, and for what I can't do, there's a calculator on my phone. Science? I break the laws of physics at least six times before even arriving at school. The last time I even tried to attend one of the science classes at Furinkan the teacher screamed me out of the class. I haven't even bothered to try going to one in Kuoh. And Language Arts, what's the point of that? I know how to read and write already, at what point in my life am I supposed to think 'oh I need to write down an essay?' I'm a martial artist, I don't do reports, I don't do essays, I don't do sit-down type work at all! Some of that might've been useful if I was planning to become a full-time dojo master, but I'm not! My goal is to just keep getting stronger, keep getting better day to day."

When he first began on that miniature tirade, Ranma's voice was almost a mumble, and he had refused to look his mother in the eye. By the time he finished, he was speaking more normally, tapping the papers for emphasis with each word and looking back at her firmly. "No, if this offers me enough money, I'm all for it."

Nodoka frowned, crossing her arms under her chest as she practically glared at her son, bringing down as much motherly disapproval as she could. "So you'd want to be a lay about like your father? Genma never finished high school either. I'm not saying this isn't an amazing opportunity, but the government has gotten by without such a force for decades, it can wait one more year at least."

"But Pops also never held down a real job, not even the one Tofu gave him. This is the government giving me a real job here. And as for not needing this kind of thing before, that was before the supernatural world's problems started to bleed over into the real world. What kind of damage could someone like Taro do if he went off the deep end? Or how many guys like that Freed character Saeko tangled with are there."

Asia flinched at that, while Saeko hummed thoughtfully, and then the swordswoman spoke up. "While it is interesting to hear that Ranma might be getting such a job from the government, you didn't give us much detail as to what precisely it is. Furthermore, is he the only one being given such an opportunity?"

While Nodoka pouted at the younger woman as if Saeko had just betrayed her, Saeko resolutely did not meet her gaze, looking at Rika exclusively. For the policewoman's part, she shrugged her shoulders. "You must have me confused with someone who's in that kind of loop. I did ask, and was told they were getting some pushback for some reason about offering you a similar job. I've no idea why, or where it's coming from."

Saeko frowned pensively at that, then shrugged her shoulders. "While he probably would not have gone in search of such a job for me, my father would certainly not stand in my way if one was offered to me. Still, I can follow up on that. And unlike Ranma, I would prefer to finish high school. While I am more than willing to follow the path of the Art for the rest of my life, I have yet to evince any special ability with ki, and thus may age as a normal person. Eventually..."

Here Ranma interrupted quickly. "Hey now! You've only known that ki is a real thing for less than four months! Give it a year and a half, I'll bet you'll have gotten up to the point I was when Happosai first showed up in Nerima. Another year, you'll be up to where I am now in ki manipulation."

Saeko smirked slightly at that, knowing as Ranma did that by that point, Ranma would have continued to grow even more and that she might never catch up. Not unless he devoted all his time learning new things to the magical connection between Ranma and Jusenkyo. Still, Saeko did not resent that, indeed, she was quite pleased at Ranma's compliment. "Thank you, but still. I think that I would like to finish school. In addition, there are such things as online courses these days. Not normally at the high school level, but I'm certain that with the government's assistance, you could find some."

Now it was Ranma's turn to look betrayed, and Saeko smirk turned into a wicked grin at his expense. "I would even be willing to help you with your lessons. And I know our other friends would be willing to do the same. So long as I'm around to watch them anyway."

The end of that came out as a mumble, but Ranma heard it anyway, and flinched, reminded of a particular conversation the two of them needed to have at some point.

"That sounds easy enough to set up. And before you sign the thing, I would have someone look that contract over for you. This **is** the government we're talking about after all," Rika said, shaking her head. "For now, I was told that I should take you to meet with my captain. We want to talk to you about normal martial artists, supernatural critters and weapons. Specifically, what kind of loadout we should have to fight martial artists of your caliber or the supernatural equivalent. We'll be paying for this like you were a special guest speaker, so that'll put some cash into your pocket right away."

"... A battleship?" Ranma quipped, mock wincing as Saeko smacked his shoulder lightly with a laugh. "Sure, that sounds like fun."

That this would allow him to put off the awkward conversation with Saeko for a bit longer was a bonus. Although by the look in Saeko's face as he hastily got to his feet, his girlfriend sensed that something was up somehow. *How do girls do that! I'm a master of reading my opponents body language in a fight, but girls, especially to be able to do it in social situations without any training at all!*

So long as you agree to take online classes, and remain living at home with Asia, Kasumi and myself, I will withdraw my objections to your no longer going to high school Ranma," Nodoka said, sighing. She knew when a battle was lost, and was willing to cut her losses now. *Besides, if Ranma is home and taking lessons online, that will allow me to make certain that he actually takes them seriously. Not that I doubt Saeko could provide... proper motivation, but their time on task would be questionable.*

“Ano, just remember Ranma-nii, that Gabriel is going to be leaving this afternoon at around five. She, Xenovia and Irina have already made their travel plans and everything,” Asia remained them all.

Ranma looked at Rika who nodded. “If we don’t finish before that, we can take a break whenever. Really, like I said this is just to give me, my superior officer and my squad more of what we’d be signing up for if we decided to join this new team.”

With that, the breakfast table broke up. Kasumi and Nodoka stayed where they were for a few moments to clean up, before Kasumi hurried out of the house to her own job, while Saeko carried Asia over the rooftops towards Kuoh Academy.

For a few moments, the policewoman simply led Ranma down the street, stopping when they reached a parked motorbike. There Rika pulled out a spare helmet, tossing it to Ranma, before pulling on one of her own. “I doubt you’ve ever ridden a motorcycle before have you?”

“Don’t actually see the point to them,” Ranma said with a shrug. “I’d wager I could travel just as fast in the city is any kind of motor vehicle. And outside of the city where I’ve been are normally places that don’t have access to things like roads or gas.”

Rika chortled at that. “The city, I’ll grant you. You can travel in a straight line over the rooftops. But we’re not going to be in Kuoh for long.”

Since that made sense to Ranma, he didn’t protest further, simply hopping on after Rika got on, blushing a little at the need to hold the woman around the waist. She smirked over his shoulder, the expression somehow visible in her body language if not her face thanks to the helmet’s visor. I’m not made of glass kid, or are you scared your little girlfriend would find out that you’ve been getting touchy-feely with another girl?”

Not even half a year ago, any such question to Ranma would have gotten the rote response of his not being afraid of anything. Those times were long gone however, and he simply nodded seriously. “You’re a woman, surely you know of the mystical powers of female fury! I have been at the receiving end of that kind of thing far too often as it is.”

And while Saeko wasn’t the type to leap to conclusions like Akane, it didn’t help matters that Ranma was already hiding a little something from her. As they sped off, and Rika began to pick up speed, Ranma hung on, not impressed just yet, his thoughts still on Saeko and Rias. *I need to have that conversation dammit! Running from my problems was what caused so many of my problems before. I can’t do it any longer. Freaking communication BS.*

With that resolve given at least internally, Ranma began to simply enjoy the ride. While in the city Rika wasn’t able to hit the same kind of speed that Ranma could go at a full sprint, it was kind of nice to go at that speed without putting in any effort. After they got to the highway,

she let loose, the bike moving even faster than Ranma would be able to without using ki to reinforce his legs.

Unfortunately for Ranma, the trip wasn't all that long. Barely twenty minutes passed after they got on the highway before they were pulling off, heading down through a series of side roads, then up into what was marked as a police training facility, the place about three blocks wide and demarked by a two story tall outer wall. There, Rika flashed her credentials at an officer who came out of a gatehouse, who shot a few looks Ranma's way as he input her ID into his system. But Ranma said nothing, and the bike continued up the hill, before pulling into a side park, slowing to a stop.

Pulling off her helmet, Rico left it hanging on the bikes handles, taking Ranma's from him and doing the same on the other side. "Come on kid, let's introduce you to my captain."

"Does he know about the supernatural and stuff already, or was that all just a report to him?" Ranma asked, looking around at the training facility. Beyond the outer gate, there was a short squat building to one side, which Ranma thought might be the armory given that it had four guards posted outside if, all of them armed, the doorway leading slightly downward. Across from it, near the outer wall was another building that looked like a barracks. At the third point of the triangle was what looked like an office building, although only three stories tall, looking more like a triangle itself than the square construction of the other two buildings. "And is this place a SAT facility, or a regular police place?"

"SAT. Most of us won't be put on the squad you'll be on, but considering that will be just one team, and there are dozens of SAT squads, we'll probably run into more of the supernatural if it's out there and continues to bleed over into our world," Rika said, her tone at the end turning grim. She'd been told of some of the murders that the exorcists who had moved into Kuoh had done for fun before going after Asia, and definitely wanted a chance to introduce those fuckers to her gun collection.

"Ah, gotcha. As for seeing more incidents, I can't tell ya how that'll go one way or another. The devils at least seem to do a good job policing themselves... most of the time anyway," Ranma said, before asking again if Rika's captain had direct experience with magic or anything else.

When he did, Rika looked a little grim. "He knows about supernatural. You met him when we picked up those automated CROW systems, Ranma, remember?" Ranma blinked then slowly shook his head and Rika sighed. "Well, anyway, yeah. Captain Hiryu led the team when we ran into this rogue devil creature thing. Or at least that was what Akeno told us it was when we described the creature to her. I don't know how Captain Hiryu will react to your curse in person, but he read your file and gave us the okay to use those weapons, so he should be good with it."



Ranma nodded. "So long as he doesn't react by tossing water in my face and then scalding water to see the curse activate in person, we're good."

Starting at that, Rika led the way into the office building, then up a flight of stairs to the third floor and then to an outer office overlooking the parking area and the central portion of the complex. There, they barely had to wait a few seconds before the secretary allowed them through.

The police captain was a trim spare man, with little visible muscle, but with a certain amount of poise like gymnast or judo practitioner as he stood behind the desk, nodding to them both. His hair was short cropped as if he was in the military and silver entirely through. In some ways, the man reminded Ranma of Saeko's father. *He's got a certain kind of strength to him.*

"Ranma Saotome, we haven't been formally introduced before this. I'm Akira Hiryu. Sit down. I'm not going to ask you to go over the report we've seen both from you and from Rika and her partner about the fallen angels. But I want to make certain that such an all-out assault isn't normal before we go on," the man stated, gesturing both of them to sit down. "Realize I will also be recording this conversation on my computer to share with my people."

"I'm cool with ya recording this conversation later, but not right now." Hiryu frowned at that, but swiveled his computer around so that Ranma could see the recording program hadn't started yet. When he did, Ranma nodded and answered the man's question. "And no, it isn't normal. And it wasn't even directed at us mere humans. It was instead directed against political targets. Two of the devils living in Kuoh are the daughters of important political families in hell."

"Damn... and that would be why you didn't mention any names huh. Neither the government nor I are particularly happy about these devils or fallen or what have you hiding amongst our normal populace. That seems like a battle that we are doomed to fail at regardless thanks to their magic. They do have magic stuff to make them disappear and what not, right?"

Ranma waved his hand back and forth. "Sort of. They've got a lot of mind control stuff, they can erase memories, replace them and so forth. Spells, which I presume can make them invisible. How well they work against modern tech, that's outside of my area of expertise. None of them have been able to hide from me well enough to pass as human though. I was able to pick out all of them within a few moments of seeing them in person thanks to my ki sense. But don't expect me to rat any other devils out. So long as they're not hurting anyone, I don't care."

The captain grunted a bit, thankful for the fact that he had read through Ranma's report. Ranma wasn't actually being disrespectful to Akira as Ranma saw it. To Ranma's way of thinking, being forthright like this rather than respectful was simply the way he always was. He would act the same way to a teacher or his own father as he would the captain, and the captain was willing to go along with it. "Fine. I'm not so interested in discovering who amongst us are devils or whatever. I'm only interested in making certain that we can stop any that have gone rogue if they go on a rampage. What kind of tactics would you recommend?"

At that, Ranma hit the record button on the computer, speaking loudly and clearly.

“You’re not going to have a single one-size-fits-all tactic... well except for trying to trap them on a territory of your choosing. Don’t fight any martial artist of my caliber or anything more dangerous without a plan and in an area, you don’t mind shooting up. As for more specifics, some enemies are going to be super durable and slow, others will be able to fly around like the fallen we fought. That anti-air gun thing that Rika had us pick up before the battle began worked pretty well, as did the sniper rifles against the low tier fallen. But against the type of opponent like that asshole who led them, the best idea would be to simply run away. Evacuate the area and all the civilians if you can, or better yet, call in a devil or someone else from the spiritual side of things to create one of their pocket dimensions.”

At the grumbles at that, Ranma shrugged his shoulders. “Beyond that, keeping a distance is probably your best bet by far. Smoke, fog or something that will affect their senses too. Their senses are also far keener than ours are, so something like a flash bang going in their faces will hurt their senses. Against devils and fallen, maybe holy relics? They might be worth a try. Holy water I know works.”

“What about against angels?”

“Hah! Angels are more likely to cause trouble because they don’t remember they need to blend in or forget about local laws and so forth than go around causing the trouble you might be called in for.” Ranma snickered. “Besides that, there aren’t many angels around on Earth any longer. Most live up in Heaven. You’re far more likely to run into excommunicated exorcists or Fallen Angels.”

From there, Ranma described both of those groups in greater detail, then went on to explain the ranking that the Fallen and Angels both used. The devils were a bit trickier, as he didn’t want to use specific names, not while being recorded. Eventually Ranma got across the idea that any supernatural entity above ‘four wing pairs’ was bad news. “I can fight someone who’s got five wing pairs now, but I’d wager I can become even stronger with enough training. But most normal people could barely keep up with the movements of a three wing Fallen, let alone anyone stronger. It’s speed which will let them kill ya more than anything else.”

“What about crew-served weaponry, RPG’s or explosives? Tank rounds? Bigger ordinance?” Akira asked.

“Explosives, I’ve heard of something called formed charges or something like that? Used to get through armor? Those might work, if you can hit the guy with it. But that’s going to be a major problem, like I just said. All supernatural people I’ve met and most martial artists will move a heck of a lot faster than normal people are used to. No offense, but we’re way beyond whatever you might think of as normal. Trust me on that,” Ranma was sounding at least little apologetic about that, even as both captain and Rika scowled.

“So you’re saying there’s no gun in our arsenal that could put someone like you down?” Rika demanded challengingly.

“If I could see the muzzle flash, I’d be able to dodge most bullets. Low caliber handheld ones wouldn’t bother me at all. Even that anti-air thing wouldn’t bother me much if I knew it was there,” Ranma said shaking his head. “Not even if they had armor piercing rounds. That’s what the toughness training is for.”

“That sounds almost like a challenge,” Rika growled. “Just don’t get angry when I shoot through your defenses.”

Ranma smirked at her, but Akira brought them back to task, asking a few more questions about the fallen angels specifically, their own weaponry, and the impact it had on material things, such as guns, armor, handheld weapons and the surroundings. The Light Spears and how they could change shape as well as their deadliness was a disturbing sign of the magic that Akira was still struggling to believe was real.

During this conversation Akira took some notes to go with the recording, then he went on to ask Ranma some questions about magic, specifically any locations in Japan that were magical in origin. This led into more specific fights from his past before, after another hour, the conversation shifted back to tactics.

Soon though, Akira felt that he had squeezed enough information from Ranma for now. “I think I’m done asking questions for now. Let us adjourn to the firing range, where you can show off some of that speed of yours.”

Ranma nodded eagerly, and soon enough, they were standing in front of the armory. Akira handed over his ID, and they were allowed inside. Akira and Rika both stopped to pick up guns, and gathered several other men to them, who were already out in the firing range.

Ranma quickly grabbed one of the safety headsets, putting it on his head, tapping it as he did, saying, “Remember what I said earlier. Anything that attacks their senses is probably the better way to go instead of something that just attacks their bodies.”

Rika both nodded, then gestured to a series of guns. These were the guns she, Tajima and the rest of the SAT routinely used. This was a vast variety in guns. The SAT was not called in unless shit had truly hit the fan, and as a unit they did not, as Rika had put it more than once, ‘have a safety catch.’

Ranma recognized the sniper rifle that Rika had used during the battle against Koka-baka and his merry band of morons, which Rika called a Heckler & Koch PSG-1. The sidearm she had used when they first met, the one that Ranma had taken from her, was apparently called a 9mm SIG Sauer P226. Of similar size was something called a machine pistol, although the main weapons for most of the SAT personnel were Japanese made battle rifles and machine guns.

While the names flew over Ranma's head, and he had no idea why a rifle would need to be called a 'battle rifle', Ranma could at least recognize the function and form of each gun in turn.

Some were more esoteric. A M72 LAW, a rocket launcher that resembled the bazookas of WW2 caught Ranma's eye, and he pointed to it and what was labeled a Type 06 rifle grenade. "Those would probably be your best bet against someone like me, but they'd be even easier to dodge than more bullets."

"He says that so casually," Tajima muttered. He was one of the SAT team members waiting for them in the firing range. "But from what I saw in that, that fucking war we were a part of, he's telling the truth, guys."

"Feh, I'll believe it when I see it," scoffed one of the others.

"Well, then prepare ta be amazed." Ranma snickered.

What followed was somewhat humiliating for the SAT personnel.

Ranma trotted down to the edge of the firing range, and then bid any five of them fire at him at a time. By the time they had finished pulling the trigger, Ranma was already moving. It wasn't just the muzzle flashes that he could track, it was the movement of their fingers. The pistol rounds were deflected by Ranma's hands, while those from the battle rifles were either dodged, or taken on forearm and shin. The sniper bullets, armor-piercing ones, were continually dodged until Ranma, his arm glowing blue with ki, deflected one shot from Rika into the ground. "Huh, okay, so that works. Cool."

The machine guns were a little more troublesome, blasting through Ranma's defenses and leaving tiny bruises, which "Stung like bee stings!"

A few of the more esoteric weapons though changed Ranma's impression somewhat of guns. One gun the team had, which Rika was quick to point out, "We really don't, and if anyone asks we do not have this in our armory, Ranma, understand!?" was called a Barrett. Armed with an anti-armor round, Ranma estimated that thing would be able to tear off a limb at least if Ranma wasn't reinforcing his body with ki. Another, a Gatling gun, would also give Ranma a very bad day indeed if Tajima's explanation of it was anywhere close to accurate, firing bullets at a rate that made even the fastest Amaguriken seem slow.

Yet even there, if Ranma could keep his head and heart in one piece, ki healing would let him survive or just take the shots if he was quick enough to reinforce his body. Which wasn't even the biggest problem.

"You have to understand, when it comes to pure skill I'm a bit above Koka-baka, the asshat who led the fallen angels into Kuoh. When it comes to durability, I wasn't. And he wasn't anywhere near as tough as others out there, like Gabriel or the Maous. They would laugh at

anything handheld or on a vehicle. Hell, I made a joke about a battleship being needed, but even those big ass guns wouldn't be enough to put them down," Ranma warned. *I might eventually get there with access to Jusenkyo magic but that's a long time in the future.* "When you get to a certain point in terms of how much magic you've got, you just start to become super durable.

"We'll have to head to a military base to try anything heavier on you," Akira grumbled, pulling his shoulder and hand away from the rifle he had been using, before disassembling it quickly, making certain he hadn't left a round in the chamber. Moments later, he got the all clear from everyone else on the gun range one after another. Ranma had been impressed by how much safety precautions went into using a gun range, not that he obeyed most of them, considering he was currently a target for said guns.

Once everyone was back in the locker area, the questions began. Ranma fielded most of them easily, talking about what guns worked best, which he had a problem with, and no, silencers wouldn't really matter to him.

"What about anti-material rifles? Lasers and things like that?" Tajima asked.

"Anything heat-based won't bother me at all," Ranma said bluntly, shaking his head to the officer's question. He hadn't been introduced to many of the policemen, but they had all apparently been briefed already about the supernatural. Only a few of them had looked disbelieving when Ranma had trotted out into the firing range, and by this point, none of them did any longer. "I took this thing called the Phoenix pill once, it makes me completely immune to hot temperatures. As for the others... I doubt it. Not against anything at my level or above. A lot of magic seems to be about energy, lightning, fire, stuff like that. If someone's got enough magic to tank the one, they can probably tank the non-magical equivalent."

"Electricity? Asphyxiation?" another officer asked, a more morbid question than the first in Ranma's opinion, but he still answered readily.

"Electricity would bother the heck out of me sure, but you'd need a tremendous voltage to put me down even for a few seconds. I've been hit by lightning strikes and walked it off. Breathing? I can hold my breath for around an hour normally." Ranma frowned thinking about it. "Gases though... you might be onto something there. Things that make you cough, or irritate the lungs, that kind of thing might work a little better. Nothing that is simply lethal, I doubt that would work, like poisons or diseases. I've dealt with a lot of fumes and stuff like that from poisoning attempts in the past, and again, magic will probably form a good defense against that kind of thing."

Well, Ranma called them poisoning attempts, but really, it had been mostly Akane's cooking, and a few gas attacks from Mousse and Kodachi. *Huh, I wonder what Mousse and Shampoo are up to today? I only saw Shampoo once last night when we were running around after Happy. I kind of expected her to show up and some point after and make everything that*

*little bit worse, but I guess Rias beating her in a spar made the girl realize she should keep her distance.*

“What do you think is the most important in terms of training?” Akira asked, gesturing Ranma off of the gun range. The rest of the police officers followed after, interested to hear Ranma’s reply as they exited the building out into a large training area.

Ranma paused, looking at the time, gesturing up to the clock to grab Rika’s attention. She looked and nodded indicating they would need to leave soon if they were to get back in time to let Ranma see Gabriel off.

With that, Ranma turned back to Akira.

“I’d say that the most important thing is to get all of you up to the point you can use ki. Although, I don’t know if any of you will ever be able to. Most of us who are able to start building up our ki well before we know what we’re doing consciously. Even then, it takes most people a long, long time to where they can start to use it to really enhance the healing process or their body’s toughness and durability.”

It took even longer than that for the process of ki to actually stop the aging process, but Ranma knew that he was probably much, **much** further along that particular road than most martial artists ever got. *And I didn’t have to become a ki vampire like Happy either.* “Let me think about it. For now, Rika and I need to get going.”

The pair of them left then, leaving much grumbling behind them. “All in favor of figuring out how to take that guy down a peg, say aye?” one guy muttered to another.

“Hmmm... funny you should say that. There’s one thing about the report we haven’t seen yet: that curse of his. I wonder...” the other man mused.

**OOOOOO**

It was time to leave Kuoh. Gabriel knew that. A part of her was very certain that she had overstayed her welcome on Earth, not just because she was currently in territory that belonged to two devil clans, very important ones, in point of fact, but also because she could practically hear Michael telling her to get back to heaven and her duties there. However, while it pained Gabriel to not be seeing to her duties as she should, at the moment, there was still something else that demanded her attention at the moment here on Earth.

*Well, there are many things that I would like to see, but only one is important in terms of my duties to Heaven and the Church. Well, two, Gabriel mentally corrected herself, unable to lie even to herself inside her head. The sword Ranma gave me and what it could mean.*

The sword was currently in a magically sealed bag that she carried all over her shoulder, along with their own weapon. It had originally belonged to Raquel, one of many of Gabriel's archangels who had fallen in the final battle. The battle where God died. The blade had been thought to be long lost, destroyed, claimed by the enemy or worse, as so many others were. Gabriel had really never been clear what worse in that context could mean, but it was something she had heard other archangels say about the arms and armor of their fellows lost in that battle.

But now it was returned, gifted to Gabriel freely by the human who had recovered it. A human who had some kind of connection, magically speaking to the cursed grounds in China. The battle where God and many of the most powerful devils, including Lucifer, fell.

This was something that had to be followed up on, and Gabriel's travel plans included a stopover in China, although she had yet to share this with her two companions. She knew they would be obliged to object, but such a mystery needed to be followed up on now, not lost in the bureaucracy of the church. *Though, I am glad that the move to excommunicate Xenovia and Irina was halted by Vasco. I really must thank him in person when we do eventually get back to the Vatican.*

Smiling, Gabriel set those thoughts aside for now, kneeling down and hugging Asia gently as around her, the devils and humans she would cheerfully call friends now that they had fought and played together stood. "Be well, Asia. I know this need not be said to you but keep your faith. It can give you both strength and direction as it has we in Heaven since we were made. Many have fallen from that path, but the toughness of the path does not negate the truth found in following it."

Asia nodded firmly into her shoulder, sniffing a little. "I will miss you, Miss Gabriel." It had been very, **very** nice, very uplifting to meet Gabriel, and although they'd only known one another in person for a few days, it felt as if Asia had known Gabriel all her life. Seeing her leaving like this was almost as much a wrench to see her go as Asia thought it would be to have Ranma leave her for some reason.

"Then do not consider this a farewell, simply a goodbye. We will meet again, I am certain!" Gabriel exclaimed, pulling back slightly to kiss Asia's forehead in blessing.

Xenovia watched this with a very conflicted expression on her face, although, to be fair, the farewell between Gabriel and Asia was not the only thing putting that expression on her face. The conversation going to one side between Issei and Irina also contributed, with the cherry on top being the cheerful, well-meaning farewells that Rias and even Sona gave Gabriel a moment before. While she had begun to question quite a bit about her training and the beliefs instilled within her by the church thanks to the revelation that God was dead, it still struck her as beyond bizarre to see devils and an archangel, particularly one of Gabriel's power being so friendly with one another.

“Ya know, if you let your face stay in that expression for too long, it’ll stick,” Ranma teased, smacking her lightly on the shoulder. “Cheer up. Soon enough, you’ll be away from all of these little contradictions to your worldview.”

“And left to ponder the changes to that worldview for far longer than is perhaps healthy,” the blue-haired girl retorted dryly, leaving Ranma thoughtfully. The two of them had gotten off to an incredibly rocky start and were not, in point of fact, any closer now than they had been then, but had somewhat buried the hatchet since. “You... you really don’t care about the whole religious aspect of the Three Factions, do you?” she asked abruptly.

“Nope. I can barely remember ever being raised to believe in one religion or another. Pops sure as heck never told me about anything like that unless there was food in the offering. Then Pops’d pretend to be a believer just as long as he needed to. You can bet on that. As for me...” Ranma shrugged. “I guess I could say I’m more of a Confucianist than anything else. I just try to take people as I find them regardless of whether they are human, devil or angel. Mind you, I have yet to meet a fallen angel who isn’t a complete dick, but there could be one or two of those out there somewhere.”

Xenovia found herself snickering at that before she shook her head. “Is it really that easy?”

“For me, it is. For you? You’re going to have to figure out what you believe on your own. The cookie-cutter version that the church has given you isn’t going to work any longer. But maybe you can take bits and pieces of it and make your own faith out of it.” Ranma shrugged. “Or maybe you just say screw it and decide religion really isn’t a thing for you. It’s all up to you.”

That, Xenovia realized, was part of the reason why the prospect of faith was so worrying. All her life, she had been raised in the faith of the Church to obey the orders of those higher in the Church’s hierarchy than her. To believe wholeheartedly, to go with faith over reason when the two came into conflict. To have that faith no longer set in stone, to need to make her own decisions on what she believed, of how to act towards others when before Xenovia could simply allow someone else in the church to do it for her? That was exceptionally daunting.

“You, at least you don’t use that route alone, right?” Ranma went on, jerking a thumb towards Irina. “You got her and Gabriel to ask questions of. As the Archangel of the Message, I’m sure she could give you some insight.”

Xenovia smiled. “You’re right, I don’t have to do this all alone. So long as Issei doesn’t convince Irina to stay and become part of his harem anyway.”

“If she did, it would be a harem of one member right now. At least as far as I know.” Ranma looked a little sick at that. “Yeah, if you think that has any chance of going anywhere, it’s time to get Irina out of here for her own good.”



“I heard that!” Issei shouted causing Rias the others around them to giggle as the pervert turned away from Irina to shake his fist at Ranma. “Damn you, why did you have to get in the way of my harem dream! Just you wait, with the power of the Devil, and my Boosted Gear, I’ll overtake you soon enough!”

Ranma rolled his eyes at that, although he understood that perhaps eventually, Issei might well become stronger than him. *But that’s only assuming I’m going to be standin’ still, and that’s never been something anyone can say about me.*

Before he could say anything, the announcer in the train station they were standing in spoke up through the train stations intercoms, announcing the arrival of the train that Gabriel had booked tickets on for herself and her companions. Gabriel stood up, pulling away from Asia, ruffling her hair affectionately as she looked over at Ranma, nodding her head to him. “Take care of Asia would you? As I said to her, I can almost guarantee that we will meet again, Ranma. And when we do, I hope we can leave the deadly battle to one side, simply enjoy this creation of father’s this earth of ours.”

Ranma nodded, although he privately thought that was a very long-winded way of saying it had been fun, and she hoped that it would be fun the next time they met too. He was surprised though and Gabriel stepped forward, and pulled him into a hug, just as she had Kasumi, Nodoka, Saeko Asia, and to the surprise of many, Rias and Akeno. After her hug, Rias had looked startled but amused, while Akeno, who Gabriel had whispered something to now looked quite pensive, a faint scowl on her face appearing and then disappearing as she seemed to wrestle with some deep thought.

None of the others had gotten hugs from Gabriel, although Irina had hugged Issei, and for quite a long while as the two of them talked in quiet tones. Xenovia simply made do with handshakes.

“Be well, Ranma. And be very very careful as you try to use the magic of Jusenkyo. Remember what I said. Even as a bodiless ghost, the words of Lucifer cannot be trusted. Do not seek his spirit out, do not listen if he comes to speak to you less he suborn you. Be very careful as you explore your connection to Jusenkyo,” Gabriel whispered into Ranma’s ear.

She did not notice how hard Ranma was blushing, although Saeko did chortle that her boyfriend’s expense, saying nothing, as she had been caught in a similar position, although she wasn’t so unfortunately equipped with a visible physical reaction to such as her boyfriend. Gabriel was easily, even in her human guise, one of the most gorgeous women in the world, and to feel her body against his like this... Well, it was not the first time Ranma had cursed his hormones since Asia had fixed the damage done to him by his father. But it was perhaps the loudest he had done so, even if his words were simply confined to the inside of his head. *Down! Down! You will not come to attention! My body obeys me, it does not make demands!*

His stomach proved at that point that it might well be a sentient creature on its own right, as it seemed to reply to that thought, rumbling a little as if saying, *Oh, really!?*

This caused Gabriel to step back, laughing as Ranma looked down at his stomach in betrayal and carefully hidden relief. *Nice save!*

“Well, I won’t keep you from your next meal, or ourselves, from catching our train any longer. Until we meet again, be well.” With that simple farewell Gabriel turned, and with Xenovia and Irina hurrying after her, made for the train.

The others, most of whom had come from the Academy and were missing classes to see Gabriel off, quickly began to break up, with Saeko and Asia waving Ranma farewell. Ranma stayed there for a few moments, staring after Gabriel, scratching at his pigtail thoughtfully until Rika came up behind him, slapping his shoulder. “Come on, hungry one. My boss was able to get us a clearance to head to one of the nearest JSDF basis to try some heavier ordinance out on you later today, but he also wanted to ask you some more questions about training before that. Still, I can at least feed you your last meal before shooting at you. So long as fast food works.”

“Eh, not my favorite, but it will do,” Ranma said, turning away from where he had watched Gabriel and the others with her sitting down in the train.

Something about his tone made Rika look at him in confusion. “What?”

“Nothing. I’m just... it feels as if there was something I should’ve said to Gabriel, something about Jusenkyo I forgot to mention.” Gabriel had spent some time at the beach and directly after the battle with Kokabiel, questioning Ranma about Jusenkyo and his connection to the spirit of Raquel, hence her warning about Lucifer being repeated her.

Ranma shook his head, then shrugged. “I’m sure it wasn’t anything important. Now come on. You said something about food, and my parasite must be fed.”

Aboard the train, Irina frowned pensively, looking down at her ticket thoughtfully. She hadn’t looked at them previously, but now, as she sat alongside Gabriel and Xenovia in a trio of seats facing forward, she had to point something out. “Lady Gabriel, is there a reason why we are going to Yokohama. Thought the urgency with which the church wants us back, we would be heading straight to Tokyo’s airport for a straight flight back.”

“We’re not going straight back. I wish to examine Jusenkyo myself,” Gabriel stated simply. “Not to denigrate their educations, but I know quite a bit more about magical residue, both Holy and Demonic, than any of the church investigators could have learned. And if there are other spirits there, I wish to see if the background chaotic magic is settled down enough to let us contact them. If it has, we could recover quite a lot of holy weapons, to say nothing of finally laying to rest old friends long lost.”

“And did you get approval for that change in our itinerary, Lady Gabriel?” Xenovia was skeptical that was the case. Nevertheless, if she had, more time away from the church might well help Xenovia get her head on straight before she had to face Vasco or her mother.

“I did actually. Michael wasn’t happy, but he agreed that as the only archangel on earth at present, I would have some insight that church investigators might not share. And besides,” Gabriel said, clapping her hands happily then holding them out, suddenly holding several brochures of places in China. “This way, we can do some more sightseeing! I do so love seeing the works of hand that humans have made over the centuries. And then to compare them to the natural wonder of the world that father created, why, what could be more pleasant than that?”

The two young exorcists exchanged a glance, then as one, shrugged. It did sound interesting, and who knew, maybe in examining Jusenkyo, the two of them might be able to find some holy relic of their own to pair with their Excalibur blades? You never knew, after all.

**OOOOOO**

Once they got back to the SAT building, from which they would be taking a helicopter out to the JSDF base later that day, Rika once more led Ranma into the training area that was part of the bunker-like armory, only on the first floor instead of in the basement like the shooting range. “So what do you think we should start training on Ranma?”

As soon as they entered, one of the policemen who was there to meet them pulled out a toy water gun and hit Ranma in the face with it. The man then stared, as did his companion, before bursting out into laughter. “Holy shit! It’s real! I can’t believe it. I didn’t think that part of the report was accurate at all! But he really does transform into a girl when wet!”

“And her hair is so red! Hah, does the carpet match the drapes?” the other wag shouted.

Rika scowled, shaking her head. “Dammit, there’s always some jokers....”

Her voice trailed off as Ranma pushed her now wet hair out of her face, and began to crack her knuckles. Suddenly, she was holding what looked like dozens of small rubber bouncy balls around the size of a quarter, six in each hand. “As I was going to say before I was so rudely interrupted. The best thing for all of you would be to train your reflexes. You need to be able to keep up with us martial artist types, let alone the supernatural. And, since we are here in the training area, I think this is a perfect time to start.”

Akira, who was standing near the doorway hoping to watch the training Ranma would put his team through, frowned, then yelped as a rubber ball smacked into his forehead so hard it caused him to flip in midair ass over head. The ball in Ranma’s hand was replaced by a metal one, the sight of which had Tajima hurriedly grab at some body armor someone had left out,

ducking and shucking it on over his head in one motion. "And I believe in group punishment. So dodge, you fools! **DODGE!!**"

As Rika begin to roll to the side, Akira stayed where he was on the ground, figuring Ranma wouldn't target a downed opponent, realizing that they had learned two more important things today. First, Ranma didn't like ribald jokes or being turned into his alternate form as a joke. That would cut into his own group's sense of humor while out on the job quite a bit, but that was alright.

*And I've also learned who will be assigned latrine duty for the rest of the month, the captain mused while chaos erupted around him amid the squawks and screams of pain from his troops.*

**OOOOOO**

While Ranma was having fun with the SAT troops, Mousse was returning to the apartment he and Shampoo had gotten upon arriving in Kuoh. They had done so in the traditional martial artist manner: trolling for buffoons. Mousse hadn't actually stayed the night there the last night, instead remaining with Ranma and his family until sunup, then leaving before any of the others were awake to check on Shampoo, only to be splashed seven times and turned into his duck form. After that, he had been forced to avoid well-meaning police officers and excited children alike.

*"Shampoo, my love, I'm home!" Mousse shouted as he opened the door. Yes! Goddess, this is just like some of my fantasies, coming home to my wife. Like in those mangas, she will welcome me and ask what I want first: a bath, a meal or...*

He paused, staring at the sight in front of him. Shampoo was there, her derriere currently facing towards Mousse, but that was where his fantasy ended as the reason for this was the fact his love was presently performing a perfect kowtow in front of her grandmother, who was a far less welcome sight. "Elder Cologne. It is... very... nice to... see you," Mousse stated, his tone almost robotic as he closed the door gently behind him.

*"Your sarcasm does not become you, Mousse. Nor do the actions of my granddaughter show her in good light. Running off and interfering with Ranma again when I told the boy we wouldn't bother him any longer!? What were you thinking?" Cologne growled, rapping Shampoo on the top of her head with her staff. "He is a blooded warrior many times over, and you know that the marriage does not apply to such. And even if it did, even I would hesitate to fight Ranma as he is now. Coming here after Ranma, you disobeyed a direct order from an elder. Even if you are my granddaughter, there are some things that you simply can't get away with."*

Glumly, Mousse assumes the position beside Shampoo, banging his head against the floor. "I am sorry, Elder! I simply wished to follow my beloved!"

“As did Shampoo! Kiss of Marriage no matter! Shampoo--”

“Speak Chinese, girl! You know I hate how stupid you sound in Japanese,” Cologne grumbled.

Shampoo paused, then nodded, going on in Putonghua. “As I was saying, the Kiss of Marriage doesn’t matter. I might have been interested in Ranma because of that from the start, but I came to love Ranma for his own sake! It does not matter if Ranma does not feel that emotion towards me yet. He will eventually. All I need to do is to stay near Airen and beat off the hussies that are always surrounding him.”

Shampoo ended with a grumble, then yelped as Cologne’s walking staff came around and smacked her upside the head far harder than a moment ago.

“If by hussy you mean that Kasumi girl or Busujima, I do not believe that is at all accurate. Kasumi has never shown any interest in Ranma as a man, and Saeko, well, she too is a blooded warrior. Younger, not nearly as well-trained as Ranma, but still.” Cologne wasn’t understating things there. If Saeko had been a member of the tribe, she would have been quite proud of the girl from what little she had seen in Nerima when they fought the devils. “And if you are speaking of Healer Argento, I am not above washing your mouth out with soap, girl!”

“I, I didn’t mean Kasumi, Busujima or the Honored Healer,” Shampoo answered unconvincingly. “I know that Sword Girl... er, Saeko is interested in Ranma, and I am... willing to compete with her in ways other than fighting for his affections. But there are other women who are just as interested in Ranma. Devil hussies!”

“More devils? I take it these aren’t simply combative, though,” Cologne mused. “You answer, Mousse. I don’t want to hear Shampoo’s side of the story alone.”

“I believe that Shampoo is correct that one. There are many devils here, none of them violent or combative towards us. There might be possibly two other girls interested in Ranma,” Mousse said after thinking about it. “One of them could be serious about it, a redhead by the name of Rias. She is one of the local leaders of the devil's side of things. There are no fallen angels or angels in the area any longer. There was a representative of the church, an archangel by the name of Gabriel, but she...”

Now it was Mousse’s turned to be interrupted, although in his case, it wasn’t because of pain, but rather the sight of Cologne’s eyes widening and her falling sideways, crashing to the ground from the top of the pile of pillows she had been sitting on. “Gabriel! Archangel Gabriel? She was on earth?!” *Could that have been the shiver that the Elder Council felt around a week ago?*

“Yes, Elder. She was quite terrifying in the battle we had here two days ago, to be honest. But she seemed to be quite kind outside of it.” *And amazingly hot as well,* Mousse

admitted to himself, something he would never dream of saying aloud. Gabriel was easily the personification of virginal beauty, kindness and otherworldly grace (and bust), but her very naïveté did not interest Mousse very much. She was more like an amazing painting or sculpture he could admire, but he didn't feel any lust toward her, unlike Issei and Saji, for example. *Hell, I can remember a few times that Ranma blushed when he looked at her. I must remember to tease him about that the next time we fight. Who knew that Ranma would have a wandering eye now that he's got a libido?*

Mousse well understood that would probably get him a thrashing, but he'd still do it for what he'd heard called 'shits and giggles'. There were few enough times Mousse could remember getting one over Ranma since their first meeting. He would treasure such an opportunity to embarrass the other man, to say nothing about their ongoing conflict about Shampoo, although, by this point, Mousse knew well enough Ranma had no interest in his beloved.

"When you say battle, what exactly do you mean?" Cologne asked, recovering herself.

"I mean a large-scale battle against around a hundred Fallen Angels, Elder. They were here to kidnap to kidnap the devil girls, Rias and another named Sona, who are treated like royals among their people. At least as far as I understood things. It was an attempt to start up the Great War between the three factions once more," Mousse explained.

Cologne scowled, then pulled out a pipe, lighting up, and slowly, calmly took a very long drag from it before releasing a stream of smoke that curled up and around them. Mousse watched with trepidation, fearing it would set off the fire alarms, but apparently, the open window that Cologne had entered by was enough to make certain that it didn't happen. "Start from the beginning from your perspective, Mousse. I want to know everything about this Gabriel and about the battle here."

As Mousse did so, Cologne questioned him deeply about what had occurred, from start to finish, from his perspective, as well as the larger perspective he learned afterward. The idea that Japanese police took part in the battle and that modern weapons could hurt Fallen Angels was disturbing. It meant that technology was well on its way to negating many of the abilities and skills the Amazons could use, which did not bode well for the future of the tribe.

That was not the only concern Cologne had as she listened to this tale. The idea that someone would be willing to restart the war between the Three Factions was an appalling one to her. The Amazons had long known about the three factions and steered clear of them as best they could. They also understood that the strongest among them could easily wipe out their entire tribe with a single spell or attack. *When giants do war, it behooves mice to hide*, she reflected. *The idea that war could come again is horrible to contemplate. Could we survive the war even if it did?*

To learn that Ranma had fought a highly ranked fallen was also astonishing, although not as surprising as the fact that an Angel had fought alongside devils against these Fallen. Gabriel's presence on Earth still startled Cologne, although, given how Mousse described the woman's personality, softened that concern. Somewhat. *A kindly, gentle dragon is still a dragon.*

Hearing that Happy had shown up and apparently absconded with a prisoner of some kind was just the icing on the bizarre pie. It was unpleasant to contemplate, Happy having an in with the Fallen, but the fact Ranma had grown so much in such a short time and had made contacts among Church and Devils was... well, Cologne honestly could feel some pride in the boy. And in her own decision to let him go rather than try and force him to join the tribe after the Phoenix Tribe conflict.

For her part though, Shampoo didn't really care much about any of this. All that mattered to her was getting Ranma's affections back where it belonged, on her. And that Cologne seemed both angry at her and currently engrossed in Mousse's tale.

Shampoo waited until Cologne had turned her body entirely to face Mousse and was refilling her pipe before taking her chance. She leaped to her feet from where she had been sitting cross-legged so fluidly that Cologne had to nod her head at the girl's body control, even as Shampoo leaped over Cologne's head towards the open window behind her. "You keep talking to Mousse grandmother. I'm going to go check on Airen!"

Before Shampoo could get out of the window, a rope wound around her shoulders, neck and waist, pulling her back slightly. Shampoo tried to twist around, a tiny knife appearing in her hand from a hiding place along one wrist, but before she could cut them or otherwise escape, Shampoo found more ropes tied around her ankles, and then she was hoisted up by her ankles hanging out the window. "If you were needful of some fresh air, I can happily oblige, granddaughter," Cologne chortled, sitting on the windowsill as her granddaughter dangled below her, now entirely tied up in what was called shibari style by the youngsters these days.

As the Amazon's apartment was only on the second story of a building, this was very visible from the view of the people walking below them down on the street. Many of them started at the loud thumping noise that Shampoo made when her back hit the outer wall of the building, and more than a few phones came up, clicking away rapidly.

"This can't be real, can it? That's got to be some kind of dummy," one person muttered.

"I don't know, dude, I've been hearing some weird rumors about Kuoh for a while," a guy said, staring up at Shampoo and then taking another photo. "You're not about to hear me complain though."

Cackling, Cologne went back to her pile of cushions, which allowed Mousse to rush over to help Shampoo. "I'll get you out presently, my love!"

Pulling her up was the easy part. On the other hand, untying Shampoo garnered Mousse a slap to his face that sent him reeling. "I don't need your help, stupid Mousse! Taking every opportunity you can to try to touch me or other women!"

Mousse reeled away, and for the first time, being hit by Shampoo didn't make him think that he was in the wrong or that Ranma had done something to turn her against him. Instead, all Mousse felt was annoyed and hurt that she treated him that way. Perhaps this had something to do with the slap, or maybe more of it had to do with the look in Shampoo's eyes as she looked at him. The disdain there, which Mousse had never seen before. *But, no, I, I must be in the wrong. I must have. There is no way that my beloved Shampoo would look at me with those lovely eyes if I was not.*

Staring between the two youngsters, Cologne puffed again on her pipe, then observed dryly, "Your eyesight seems to be better, Mousse. Did that young healer Asia help you somehow? I would've thought that her powers would not work on something hereditary."

"I thought so as well, Elder, but she was able to do so yesterday. Because of that, I did not participate in the chase for Happosai, instead staying by her side to guard her lest he come after her in turn," Mousse replied formally.

"Get over here, girl, and close the window. Neither of you is going anywhere until I am positive that you haven't doomed the tribe by making us enemies we can ill afford," Cologne barked as Shampoo finished untying herself with one of Mousse's knives and looked to be edging towards the window again. At Cologne's harsh words, she slumped, closed the window and tromped back to her former position.

"Let us go back to the battle against the Fallen, Mousse. And if you try to escape again Shampoo, know that the first version of Shibari I used on you was the PG version. I can easily do with the R-rated version, which would make even Happy blush."

The final portion of that battle was just as interesting to Cologne as everything else. To hear that Ranma had been the one to bring the full archangels later down, that he apparently had somehow acquired a sword that had immense magical powers, which was not one of the Phoenix weapons. What was even more interesting was the response afterward. "And you say that this policewoman said that the government here might be putting together some kind of anti-mystical unit?"

"Yes, Elder. They were very interested in having Ranma and anyone he would recommend as part of it. He even said he would jokingly offer me a job if he could at one point," Mousse answered, pointing to himself.

"Hmmm... tell me, can you introduce me to one of these local leaders? On the devil's side, I mean. I know you said that the archangel left, and even if she had, I have no desire to annoy such. But I wish to get their measure. And as for this idea of the government getting



involved, I can't say I like that, but it might be something that the tribe can take advantage of in various ways..." Matriarch Cologne puffed on her pipe again, thinking of long-term problems, long-term concerns, and the difference between surviving and trying to hold onto what you thought was rightfully yours, looking between the two youngsters for a moment.

"I need to think about this more. But if you can set up that meeting for me, Mousse?" That came out as a question, but it was clear by the tone of voice that was in order, and Mousse quickly bowed and made to leave. Before he did, Cologne said, "And beyond that, I think you should stay near young Asia. Ranma cannot always be around to protect her. It would behoove us, I believe, to take up that task."

Mousse bowed again and then exited the room, fighting off instincts to rush back and help his love as Cologne turned to Shampoo. "Now, granddaughter, why don't we talk about what you've been up to since arriving in this area?" Even Mousse's love for Shampoo wasn't enough to make him want to get involved in that.

OOOOOO

After meting out some punishment/training, Ranma was surprised that Akira still wanted her to come along to the JSDF base so that they could see what heavier ordinance did to Ranma. "After all, you've had your fun seeing how much we can survive what you call training. Time to see if you can do the same when we do the same with explosive ordinance."

"Sounds like fun, but don't expect me to sit still for it. Your enemies sure won't," Ranma warned, still in her female form.

They even took a helicopter out to it, which was amazing to Ranma as it was the first time she was ever in a helicopter. Her day got even better, though, when she discovered that, much like most of the male population of the world, Ranma liked explosions. She liked them a lot. She also enjoyed the looks of the soldiers and SAT who attacked him when he either dodged their RPGs or walked out of the explosion, mostly unscathed, bar her clothing, although that was more predictable: Ranma always enjoyed stunning people with her abilities. However, even when most of the explosions were being tested on her, Ranma liked them.

The now male Ranma mulled over that fact as he bounded over the rooftops towards Kuoh Academy, wanting to see what Asia and Saeko had gotten up to for the day and hoping that they would both be able to take off. *Does that make me a masochist? That I liked those explosions even when they were turned on me? Or was it just the fact that those explosions were so damn cool. I'm good with being a little bit of a masochist, able to put up with a lot of pain definitely helps in terms of training. But I'd rather not develop weird fetishes. Especially, since I can see Saeko going that way very easily, and maybe even going to Akeno for advice about it all.*

That thought was kind of horrifying, not least of which was that while Ranma knew himself well enough to be okay with the fact that he found Akeno's body attractive, her masochism and sadism were definitely a turnoff. He also didn't think he had much in common with Akeno at all and was grateful that she seemed to flirt just as much with Mousse and Issei as she did with Ranma at the beach and after on the train. *I've already got two sexy, insanely deadly girls interested in me. I don't need Akeno or, worse, Koneko to try to get me to look their way like Shampoo still is despite everything. Although I still don't think Koneko's interested in me that way. It was probably just her sister messing with me.*

Shaking that thought off, Ranma hopped over the outer wall of the school and, after a quick round of asking for directions, found Saeko with Asia, Tsubaki, Koneko, Sona and Rias in the rest of the occult research club in their clubroom. Sona and Rias were going over some paperwork while Tsubaki and Saeko were looking at nine pistols laid out on the large sofa. Asia and Koneko were sharing a small bag of sweats as they went over some homework. All of the pistols were of the same variety, looking like an American Glock, although there were little touches if, like Tsubaki, you knew what to look for that showed they were made by hand rather than machined.

As Ranma opened the door into the room, Saeko was experimentally holding two of them in her hands, frowning at the weight of them, then moving into a simple unarmed kata Ranma had taught her while still holding the guns. "I don't know... A gun and sword combination seems to be something that I would need to train with quite a good deal, and there is more than a little bit of difference in their defense abilities, not just how to use both in tandem. I also think it's an inherently weak style in comparison to a pure sword style up close."

"Are we talking about the style gun and sword, or the weapon 'gun sword,' because one could be cool, the other is an abomination. Trust me, I just got done training with the SAT, and I can tell ya a bayonet might be a good thing to have. A gun sword is just way too unwieldy for either of its uses," Ranma quipped, moving deeper into the room and giving Saeko a pound on the shoulder before looking over at the guns in front of her.

Normally, Koneko would go up to Ranma at this point, her ears out to continue Ranma's acclimatization training. But when she heard his voice, she flinched, drawing in her head like she was trying to make herself smaller. Then Ranma's smell hit the Nekomata, and she frowned, confusion overcoming her embarrassment from last night, her nose wrinkling in a way that would've had most of her fan club swooning in delight. "You smell like fire, sweat and dirt, Ranma senpai..."

"I had a very fun day," Ranma smirked, trying not to react to the still embarrassed body language he could see from the shorter girl. "Did ya tell them about the offer I got, Sachan?"

"She did," Rias said, speaking up from the other side of her desk where she and Sona had been writing out something, looking up at Ranma with a smile as Sona continued to look

over whatever was set between them. "I'm happy for you, even if I really don't want to contemplate the idea that the Japanese government is looking to police mystics like us."

"Only if you're actively calling attention to yourselves. The government can't pick ya out of a crowd, even I'd have trouble doing that if you lot were trying to hide your ki signatures, and besides, the government might just end up working with you devils and the church to do that policing among your folk. Beyond that, it's beyond my paygrade, heh." Ranma snickered. "I'd bet someone smart like the two of you would be able to make some deals there, or get Serafall involved."

"Please no. I love my sister, but there is only so much of her I can stand," Sona grumbled, shaking her head, before humming thoughtfully, finally looking up from whatever she and Rias had been working on to look at Ranma calculatingly. "But you might be right about being able to make some deals. I think I was given a copy of Minami-san's phone number. I might follow up on that."

Nodding at that, Ranma looked back down at the guns. "Where did the pistols come from?"

"We captured them from the group of exorcists that Saeko fought along with that mad one, the one named Freed who came after Asia for some reason," Rias answered standing up and stretching, smirking at the way Ranma's eyes snapped to her, tracking the movement. He wasn't as overt about it as Issei or even Saji, but Ranma definitely liked what he saw, which sent a thrill through Rias. *I'm still not seeing an outright rejection*, she nearly sang inside her head.

Despite that, her voice was even and normal as she explained. "These are an example of what are called Light Blessed weapons. Each piece was made and sanctified in holy water before begin constructed by hand so that every inch is holy, coupled with enchantment that allows them to create Light bullets. We had a devil of a time collecting them, pun intended, as none of us can even touch them, let alone use them. But Saeko is human, so she can use them easily."

Rias also knew that offering these guns to Saeko were akin to an overture of peace before could really commence. If she could in some fashion get Saeko indebted to her, while also showing that she wasn't interested in pushing Saeko away from Ranma, then maybe Rias could cut down on the drama to come.

"They are a bit light... pun intended," Saeko deliberately used the same phrase Rias had, before going on more seriously. "So they don't hinder my movement at all, it's just working with pistols is completely foreign to me. I think though that if I was using a gun I would like something with more stopping power. I'm afraid I don't actually know much about guns."

Saeko sounded almost annoyed at that lack of weight, even as she pulled out a practice bokken and began to move through the same kata as before. She then switched up to another one from her own school of swordsmanship, trying to incorporate the gun into both. "Hmm... I

can't say I like them. Is there any way to take them apart? Keep the holiness, but somehow reconstruct them into, I don't know, some other weapon?"

"Ooh, make 'em into something cool, like those forearm guns ya see in sci-fi sometimes," Ranma proposed.

"Heh, I think those only work on power armor, but if you want, you can do whatever you want with them. I don't care," Rias answered glibly, causing the still-sitting Sona to snort.

At that twin response, Ranma cocked an eyebrow. "Really? I would've thought you and Sona would want to take a few of them for yourselves, considering that fight happened in your territory. You could say that they were your share of the spoils."

"I could if I was still going to be leading this territory. But I won't be. Two days from now, I will be replaced officially, and my peerage will no longer have responsibility for Kuoh in any way."

Rias dropped that bombshell quite offhandedly, but there was nothing wrong with the way Rias was smiling as she said it, although Sona looked a little annoyed as she finally finished whatever she was working on, leaning back in her chair and staring between Rias and Ranma. It was evident to Ranma that Sona did not approve of this, but also, whatever argument Sona might have made had already been made.

The redhead's smile was so blinding and happy that Ranma found himself returning it, fighting hard not to blush at how good it made the redhead look. "D, does that have anything to do with what was going on between you and your parents? I would've thought that retaining your position here would've been important to you."

"You would've been right if you'd said that at the start of the school year, but lately, I have been... Questioning my priorities. I don't have the same kind of goals for being in the human world that Sona has." Rias winked over at Sona.

The direct look in Rias' eyes told Ranma both of the reasons behind that and reminded Ranma that, unlike her older sister, Sona hadn't been told about the Gremory clan's bad laundry, so to speak.

Unaware of Ranma's thoughts, Sona sighed and explained, one finger pushing her glasses up her nose again. "Not that you would care Ranma, but I want to start a school in the Underworld: the first proper school for peerages involved in the Rating Game. That's why I came to Kuoh, and why I am such a stickler for the rules and why I will go on to college, so I know how to not only organize a school but much more."

"Japan was my choice because of my love for anime, manga and everything else. But I wanted to go to school because I wanted to be normal." Rias smile turned into a smirk, her eyes

becoming almost half lidded as she looked at Ranma. "You've taught me that being unusual and strange can be fun too." As Ranma blushed and Saeko noticed what was going on and began to scowl, Rias stopped, tossing her hair over her shoulder as she laughed. "So I tested out this morning of all my core classes. I'll be receiving a diploma for high school in the mail once I finish up a few essays and one science project, which will effect my final grades. The principal was not happy about it, but the school was willing to let me go."

"Let us go you mean. So long as our leaving doesn't impact the amount of money the Gremory clan is donating to the school district," Akeno said as she came out of the small kitchenette, bearing a tray of food which she sit down on the table in front of the guns, looking at them pensively. She almost seemed to want to reach out for one, then thought better of it before going on, her tone happier than it had been a moment before. "I also tested out. Kiba and Koneko did not, but as they are in the junior and freshman classes, that is to be expected. Still, if need be we can set up online classes for them"

"This way, my peerage and I can spend my time exploring Japan! There are so many places I want to see!" Rias exclaimed enthusiastically. "And the first place I want to go to is Akihabara! Then Kyoto. We can't leave yet, but we can at least start to take a few day trips."

Ranma laughed at that, but the idea of Rias wandering Japan made him remember something all of a sudden, and not his plans for a training journey with Saeko. Instead, he remembered who else might also be wandering Japan, in particular who had tried to scout him recently. "That reminds me I forgot to mention but I had a little bit of a run in with someone... or a few someone's really, when we were at the beach. It happened after you left me while we were exploring around the boardwalk Rias ..."

From there, Ranma's meeting with the True Longinus user Cao Cao and his follower Jeanne came out.

Reactions varied.

Koneko was annoyed that such a thing at happened at all, unconcerned about the bigger picture, and still working her way through the fact her older sister had been around the night before. With that, Koneko just couldn't make herself care about the news of this Khaos Brigade.

Similarly, Saeko didn't particularly care about the implications, but was far more annoyed that she had missed out on a fight. "I especially am interested in this Jeanne girl, and her European style swordsmanship. I have long wanted to see how my abilities would stack up against such. I know routinely that in the past, rapier users for certain had an edge on katana users, so it will be fascinating to see how I stack up against a longsword user."

Kiba also looked interested in that idea, while Akeno was simply chortling. "Fufufu, I cannot believe you attempted to steal a Sacred Gear off of its user. I've never heard of that before."

“Eh, honestly, that was kind of easy. Cao Cao might be tough, but he’s not up to my level in terms of speed, and I still say it was a copout that the darn thing returned to him the instant it was out of his hands,” Ranma snickered.

That snickering came to an abrupt end as Rias and Sona finally broke out of the stasis the two heiresses had been in upon hearing that the True Longinus, one of the most deadly Sacred Gears, had been so close to them, and they hadn’t realized it. “And you just now remembered to tell me about this!” Sona shrieked. “I knew you were an idiot, Ranma, but this is too much! First Kuroka, an S-class wanted criminal and now this?!”

Rias opened her mouth to join in, but then her face softened, and she quickly shifted back and away as Sona thrust to her feet and began to stalk around Rias’ former desk. Seeing that, Akeno moved over to her, watching with amusement as Sona stalked towards a suddenly cringing Ranma. “Rias-chan?”

“Oh, I just realized. With everything that has happened with my family, I’m not in a position of power here any longer. Since Ranma waited to tell us about it until after we were back in Kuoh, I don’t have to tell anyone; I can just let Sona-chan handle it. I don’t even have to tell my brother about it.”

The two beauties both giggled at that before turning back to watch as Ranma, now sitting in seiza position, glumly took it as Sona berated him on his thoughtlessness. The idea that Cao Cao, a wielder of the True Longinus, had joined the Khaos Brigade, a known supernatural terrorist group, was deeply concerning. Worse was the idea it had a faction built around heroes. The fact he had been so close, and Serafall and Gabriel there, could have meant they might have taken advantage of things, capturing the two Sacred Gear users or maybe placing a tracking spell on them. They hadn’t, thanks to Ranma being, in Sona’s words, “An idiot!”

As Sona finally let up, and Ranma got to his feet, Rias moved forward, pressing into his side, tugging at his pigtail half an annoyance and half in commiseration. “Sona can be utterly terrifying when she goes off on one of her lectures can’t she? But still, you really should have told us earlier, Ranma. Although I suppose I can forgive you if you take me out to get some ice cream at some point...”

Saeko glared at the redhead, pushing into Ranma’s other side and glaring across his chest at her, while the others all around them turned their attention from the still pacing Sona to this new bit of daytime soap-opera type drama. “Now why exactly would Ranma need to take you out to get ice cream? You have more than enough funds on your own, and I rather think that Koneko and the rest of your peerage would go with you if you wanted company.”

“But they’re not the hunky sort of company, and I know that ice cream is always a good choice for first date,” Rias answered teasingly, deciding on the fly to push Saeko and Ranma a little bit.

“How droll that you think my boyfriend would go on a date with someone other than me, his girlfriend!” Saeko hissed.

“You might be his girlfriend, but that doesn’t mean he is your property. Ranma can make his own decision,” Rias retorted.

Salvation for Ranma monetarily came in the form of Koneko who grabbed Rias around the middle and pulled the redhead off of Ranma, shaking her head as she quickly deposited the redhead onto the small sofa. “No, bad Buchou. No fighting.” Koneko then looked up at Ranma, and then quickly away, shaking her head quickly and going back to the bag of sweets she and Asia had been working on.

Feeling a tug on her own shirt, Saeko paused before she could smile smugly at her rival. Asia’s disappointed face looked up at her, and Saeko sighed, before turning a glare back towards Rias. “Fine, we won’t fight about this. For now.”

For a brief moment, Ranma fought his instincts, which were trying to force him to fade into the background or just run, instead of having the conversation he knew he needed to have with both of these girls. But then he looked at their faces, and reached inside, finding his courage. *Fucking hell communication and social interaction are just hard! Why can’t it be as easy as taking a punch in a fight? B, but it’s got to be done.* “Er, actually, could I, um, could I talk to the two of you up on the roof?”

With that, Ranma turned, a part of him hoping the girls wouldn’t follow but knowing they probably would as he made for the window.

True to Ranma’s prediction, he was soon joined on the rooftop by Saeko and Rias. Saeko had followed him out of the window by leaping up and flipping herself onto the rooftop like Ranma had, although in this case the fact she still work the academy’s uniform gave Ranma a very nice, if short, upskirt shot. Rias simply flew up, landing next to the other girl, her devil wings disappearing in the weird bit of magic.

Both of them looked at one another then back in Ranma, with Saeko looking particularly annoyed at the other woman’s presence. Annoyed, and very concerned. Something had changed between Ranma and Rias at the beach, Saeko was worried about what that could be. For her part, Rias just looked back, shrugging her shoulders when the other woman looked her way.

“Sachan I, I did some research last night about places, places that might have connections to weapons or swords, magical ones that we could hunt down. I know you need a power up if we’re going to continue to interact with the supernatural, and that kind of thing seemed the best idea going forward,” Ranma began almost babbling, and coming at the issue very obliquely. “The place I thought we could try first is in Hakata. It’s where the Mongols first came ashore, and where they were supposedly beaten by a giant storm. Legends say the storm

was caused by a sword made by the god Raijin that may or may not still be in the area. No one's found it, but the legends of it being around still persist, so it might just be that no one's been looking in the right places, and maybe martial artist types like us could have better luck."

Saeko frowned, wondering why Ranma had decided to drag them up here for this conversation, but was more than willing to go along with this topic. Indeed, she was quite eager to do so. The idea of the pistols she had been looking at before was one thing, but getting a real magical weapon, something like the swords that Kiba could create with his Sacred Gear, but which would be Saeko's in some fashion was a decidedly interesting one. "Was excellent. Anything we can leave tomorrow?"

"Might be to kill to bring this with one stone. I told Rika that I wouldn't be around on Sunday for more training, and after I told her my plans, Rika said she'd give us a lift. She's going home on leave tomorrow, but is really interested in the idea of getting some magical weapons for herself too. It's pretty obvious at this point that she and her partner at least are going to be assigned to the same team that I'll be working on, so it makes sense," Ranma explained. "That way, we can stay at hotels and she'll pay for us, and I'll pay Rika back when I get my first check."

"That's all well and good, but what about Asia?" Rias asked, instead of the more pertinent question of why she was on the roof hearing this along with Saeko, although an idea was growing in her as to why, and her heart began to thunder in her chest. "Are you taking her with you?"

"I intend to. No offense to you and your peerage, or even Sona and hers, but Asia's my responsibility," Ranma said, scratching at his pigtail and trying to figure out where this conversation was going. He had initially thought it up to try and soften the blow of what he was going to have to tell Saeko about Rias, and Ranma's attraction to her, that Ranma was still thinking of Saeko even when struggling with that. But now he couldn't figure out a way to get the topic back to that without being way too blunt about it.

Luckily for him, Rias had a thought on that score. "That makes sense. Although she and Saeko both will be missing the half day tomorrow. I can lean on the principal to expedite a bit of paperwork to give them an allowed day off rather than face a demerit. And searching for legendary weapons like that sounds fascinating! I think I'd like to go along as well, if you'll have me..." Rias began, only to be interrupted by a loud quack.

Saeko turned from where she had been about to start glaring at Rias to look at Mousse, who had just alighted down on the rooftop in his duck form. He looked up at Ranma, quacking twice more.

Ranma blinked, staring at Mousse in surprise. "Wait, Cologne is here? Is she staying, or is she here to drag you and Shampoo back to China?"



“Quack, quack, quack,” the duck quacked, then gestured to one side with his wing, sifting along the rooftop with his feathers, then up into the air.

“So not yet, but she wants to eventually. But she wants to meet with one of the local leaders?”

This time the duck merely nodded, and that at least Rias could follow along and quickly shook herself. *How the heck does Ranma speak duck! How the heck does a duck actually carry on a conversation at all!? If it was a language, I'd be able to understand it, but no, it's just animal noises. Still, at least I don't have to deal with the Amazons any longer.* “You can go downstairs to meet with Sona, she should have some hot water for you, and you can explain who this Cologne is to her, and what that meeting might be about. She'll probably do a much better job of being all official about it than I would anyway. Even if I wasn't standing down as co-leader of this territory.”

Mousse nodded at that, then looked over at Ranma, quacking several more times, to which Ranma just nodded. “That sounds fine to me, it's always good to have another pair of eyes around. Just don't mess up, and think Asia is Shampoo and glomp her and we'll be fine.”

The duck craned its neck around to stare up at the sky in a pose of affronted dignity, quacking twice, causing Ranma to snicker. “Come on dude, it's not like you've had eyes that actually work for even a week yet, y'know? Your past's gonna be working against ya for a long while yet.”

Mousse nodded morosely at that, flapped his wings, and headed off over the side of the rooftop down towards the still open window, leaving both Rias and Saeko to stare at Ranma. “What did he say?” Saeko asked.

“Healers like Asia or even regular doctors are revered among the Amazons even above warriors. The Old Bat's basically assigned Mousse to watch over Asia full-time as long as the Amazons are around.” Ranma frowned pensively, shaking his head. “I wouldn't put it past Cologne to have some hidden motive for that, but don't ask me what it is.”

While she had no desire whatsoever to get involved in politics ever again, that didn't negate the years that Rias had been forced to learn about politics and societies in general, and she could see at least two reasons right off the bat. “Mousse is a strong warrior, right? Stronger than Shampoo?”

“Honestly? Yeah. His hidden weapons space technique is really dangerous even if you know about it. He can somehow fling stuff out at speed, which is a trick even I haven't figured out yet.” Ranma grumbled a bit at the last bit, but continued, readily admitting, “He's come closest to beating me of all my normal rivals back in Nerima until I got too strong and too fast for him to keep up with. If Mousse went all out, I bet he could beat Shampoo if he could let himself hurt her in the first place, anyway.”

“Which means he might well be a problem for the Amazons. They don’t want to acknowledge one of their own males as so strong. So she could be playing matchmaker with Asia, who she might know healed Mousse’s eyes for him. Or maybe it’s something else entirely. Maybe it has something to do with continuing to have someone close to you.” Rias shook her head then, returning to the former topic of conversation. “As I was saying, I would like to come along if I could.”

Saeko instantly opened her mouth to protest, but Ranma spoke up quickly, deciding to rip it off like a Band-Aid. “I was thinking kind of the same thing. I, I can’t forget our conversation on the boardwalk, and I wanted to, wanted to talk to you and Saeko together....”

He fumbled as Saeko turned to him, then back to Rias, her eyes narrowed in suspicion and her hand twitching as if she wanted to grasp the sheath of her sword. That look and this whole thing was bringing up a lot of bad memories, and he found all the progress he’d made in thinking about emotions and stuff just disappearing in an instant.

Thankfully for Ranma, even as his communication skills shut down, Rias spoke up before Saeko could reach into her somewhat limited ki space for her sword. She quickly explained the conversation she’d had with Ranma, making it very clear that Rias had been the one to instigate the kiss they’d shared and that she had no desire whatsoever to push Saeko to the side.

*This explanation made Saeko both angry and frustrated but also slightly mollified. So, it was not Ranma who made the first move. Indeed, he doesn’t seem to have done anything to encourage this, just not anything to stop it either. But he should have told me about it right away! I can understand his reluctance, given his past interactions with that Akane bint and the rest of them, how he still hates hurting people’s feelings for real and whatnot. But even so, he should have at least brought it up to me without Rias around!*

Then Saeko’s eyes widened as a thought occurred to her. “Is this what you wanted to say to me this morning before your mother called us into breakfast?” she asked when Rias finished, looking a little concerned.

“I did, I wasn’t... I’m not... dammit, I’m still no good with talking about this stuff! Look, this is a really, really complicated thing here,” Ranma said, gesturing between the three of them. “And what little I found out about complicated relationships like this, communication is a key. Which I suck at! But I needed to bring it up with the two of you.” With that out of the way, Ranma calmed down a bit, reaching out to grab Saeko’s hand. She might not have let him do that, but Ranma was too fast for her to avoid, and as Ranma stared earnestly into her eyes, Saeko found herself calming down still more at the raw appeal there. “Sachan, if you say you’re not fine with this, I am willing to put the feelings the attraction I’m feeling towards Rias in a box and just never open it again. I got a lot of mental boxes like that. One more won’t matter. But it’s up to you where we go from here.”

Despite the semi-humorous way, he said that, the words were heartfelt. And Saeko's last bit of anger at Ranma sputtered out, understanding he really meant it. In contrast, Rias was somewhat dismayed, unhappy that Ranma would simply set aside the attraction they both felt towards one another on Saeko's word.

"I, I understand you mean that Ranma and I know you well enough that if you say something like that, you will do it. And I know that you didn't set out to somehow ensnare Rias' affection." She squeezed his hands, not releasing them as she looked over at Rias, frowning. Her own thoughts on this score were somewhat derailed by the fact that Rias had become one of the better friends she'd ever had. They shared a lot of interests in terms of Japanese history, manga and anime, and Rias' courage to face harsh truths had impressed Saeko, as had her willingness to be trained by Ranma despite having no previous physical combat training.

There was also something else that Rias had said that was bothering her a good deal, and as she stared at Rias, a faint blush appeared on her face for a moment. "I am not saying yes or no right away. This is far too outside of my own realm of experience to really understand. But, but your, that is, you said you were not just not wishing to push me away, you want to, that is, you find me attractive as well?"

Saeko was in no way unused to the idea that women could be attracted to women or that they could find her attractive in turn. Indeed, before meeting Ranma, Saeko would've said that she was at least bi, perhaps leaning more towards the lesbian side of things, given the attention lavished upon her by the younger girls in the kendo club she had been a part of at her previous school. And being with Ranma, in both of his forms, had done nothing to do away with such thoughts. Saeko could not deny that Rias was an amazingly gorgeous young woman. So Saeko was quite confused now, wondering if this was something she wanted or if it was just hormones talking.

At this, Rias' apprehension disappeared, and she smiled sultrily, causing both of the other people on the rooftop to blush, making her giggle internally. *For all that, the pair of them is more experienced with romance. I'm far more at home with my sexuality than either Ranma or Saeko. Time to use that.*

Rias sashayed forward, her hips moving in such a way that Ranma couldn't take his eyes off them as she moved slightly past him to Saeko, smiling at the other girl as she crowded into Saeko's personal space. "That's right. While I might be falling in love with Ranma, I'm certainly attracted to you. And what kind of devil would I be if I didn't want to have my cake and eat it, too? We are supposed to be creatures of lust and greed, after all."

Before Saeko could back away, Rias leaned in quickly, sealing her lips with the other girls. Saeko's eyes widened, but she didn't back away, too stunned to do anything really. This lasted a few seconds, or an eternity, depending on whom you asked until Rias began to probe at her still-closed lips with her tongue, at which point instinct took over. With no orders coming from her

brain, Saeko began to kiss back for a few seconds before Saeko's brain rebooted, and she pulled away, blushing rosily. "R, Rias!?"

Giggling, Rias pulled back as well, then cobra-quick twisted around and leaned towards Ranma, kissing him in turn before pulling back after only a second. "I'll get right to expediting the paperwork for you and Asia to skip school tomorrow. See you in the morning, you two."

With that, she left, leaving both Saeko and Ranma staring after her, stunned. Then slowly Ranma recovered his senses, turned to Saeko and murmured, "A, heh, um, well, devils. What can you do, right?"

"I, I don't know what to think right now. I am going to go home, and I'm going to practice until all feeling in my hands are gone, and then, I will have dinner and try to forget that this afternoon ever happened. Only then will the world once more make sense," Saeko muttered.

Ranma nodded, looking eager for a bit of mindless, repetitive training himself. "That sounds great. Do you mind some company?"

Still stunned by Rias' revelation and actions, Saeko simply nodded. "That sounds like an excellent idea."

OOOOOOO

While Ranma was working up the courage to have an awkward conversation with two of the girls in his life, actually the only two currently in his life romantically speaking, down in hell, a young man was thinking vile thoughts about Asia Argento and her strange, human guardian.

At first, he seemed a gentle-looking, quite handsome young man with dark green hair, dressed in a silk undershirt and well made expensive looking pants. Peeking out from underneath near the bottom of the neckline of the shirt was the tip of what was almost undoubtedly a large scar.

Nevertheless, that was only at first. When looked at more closely, the man's currently wide open golden eyes and bared teeth as he read a report on a piece of paper would have told a different story, as would the way he began to pace like he had personal grudge against the floor, waving his hands in every direction.

"Blast it! How could the fallen angels have been so stupid?! Where did this Ranma character come from?! First, he beats them off, then he defeats my pawns in House Etevas who tracked him to that strangely closed area, Nerima, I think the place was? Only to then somehow show up in Kuoh! And then, the Gremory bitch, Sona and the rest of them seemingly beat off a full assault by Kokabiel and his rump of a legion."

Here the man brought a fist down, on top of the back of a chair, as fire incinerated the paper in his grasp, scowling in anger before slumping into the chair, putting his face in his hands. "If only I had known! I could have ridden in like a white knight to sweep her off her feet during that battle."

Breathing out several times, the green-haired man leaned back, calming down. "There are positives to consider. For one thing, from this last report Asia isn't a part of Rias' peerage. I will have to kill the family spy who waited so long to report this though. If I had known Asia-chan was there fast enough..."

Again the man seemed to fall into a black rage, his hands clenched so hard around them, were he human he might have given himself bruises. After a few minutes, he recovered once more, his voice turning almost normal, not noticing how his previous anger had caused the other two occupants of the room to shiver in fear. "For another, Asia still believes in the church and God."

That thought made her even more desirable to the green-haired young man, and he looked over at the two young women standing against the inner wall of the room. Both women wore what could only be very loosely called nuns clothing. They looked more like X-rated versions of nun cosplay more than anything else, with a heavy emphasis on the X considering the fact that not only was both of their habits skin tight, but one of them had habit open so that her breasts were showing. Worse, her tiny pink nipples were decorated by two rings connected to one another by a chain. The other woman had a choker around her neck, and boots made of latex connected to a pair of white pantyhose, but with the panties noticeably missing. In fact, the only thing that looked like it could ever be found on a nun were the wimples on their heads.

"I do **so** like breaking holy maidens out of those pesky vows of theirs," he mused, his tone so leering and salacious that the two women trembled in fear and ingrained lust.

With a sigh, he turned away, nibbling at a finger. "And if this human is still Asia's primary protector, then the moment the two of them are away from Kuoh and all of the eyes locked onto it at present, no one can stop me from simply moving in and claiming her. I dislike taking my nuns forcefully like that. It's so much better when they fall to me through their own desires. But I must have Asia for my collection! Or else what was the point of the pain I went through, the point of setting her up to be kicked out of the church in the first place? I must have her!"

A knock on the door brought the man out of his momentary lustful thoughts. "Diodora-sama, the master has asked for your attendance."

Hearing the chief maid of the family and a member of his father's peerage call for him, Diodora of the house of Astaroth quickly composed himself, casting a small illusion spell on the two women, which covered them both with the appearance of simple nuns. As far as the rest of his family knew, Diodora had an obsession with nuns, but they didn't realize the extent to which

he enjoyed breaking them. Considering some of his dealings outside of the house, it was best for Diodora to hide all such proclivities.

Striding to the door, Diodora opened it and smiled at the maid on the other side, his golden eyes hidden in his normal squinting gaze, a smile on his face. "Tell my father I will be down in a moment. Does he wish my peerage to be present, or is it going to be just a discussion between the two of us?"

"Just you, Diodora-sama," the maid said, smiling brightly at the younger boy. He wasn't the powerhouse that his cousin was, but he was a practitioner of the family magics, unlike Maou Ajuka, and the clan took great pride in the young heir's skills. "He has a mission for you to the human world."

Diodora frowned a little at that but nodded, and after telling the maid, he would be along in a moment, turned to get his suit coat on, only for a snakelike tattoo on his arm to suddenly heat up. As he watched, the snake came alive, uncoiling from around his arm, growing as it did.

Both the former nuns trembled, and one even opened her mouth to scream, but her fellow clapped a hand over her mouth, silencing the sound before it could escape. Thanks to this, their momentary lese majesty was missed, and, when the snake grew about as large as Diodora was tall, the snake's mouth opened. From within a letter appeared dropping to the ground a second later. Its message delivered, the snake tattoo slowly shrunk, recoiling around Diodora's arm in a new position before once more turning quiescent.

The glow of magic was still on the envelope as Diodora swayed, hit by a bit of tiredness. *Blast it, using these things for communication takes it out of the receiver too much. Blast Le Fay for suggesting Ophis add that utility into it.* Shaking himself, Diodora leaned down, picking up the note quickly and reading the contents. A faint smile appeared on his face, the sight of which sent both women nearby to shivering again, before Diodora turned opening a window before setting the note on fire, turning it to ash and smoke, which the wind quickly caught carrying it away. "Well, it seems as if I am going to have three reasons to journey to Earth soon."

**OOOOOO**

Later that evening, Rias opened the door to the occult research clubroom to hug her cousin. They would have been meeting in the house that she and Akeno had lived in since moving to Kuoh, but neither had been willing to move back there full-time knowing that it is been bought and paid for by Rias' parents, given how strange they were from their daughter. "Cousin! It's good to see you."

Sairaorg Bael was Rias' cousin on her mother's side, the family from whom she and Sirzechs had inherited the Power of Destruction from, although Sairaorg himself didn't. A handsome young man with black hair and violet eyes was about a foot wider across the

shoulders than any other young man Rias had met. Even Riser, who was much older, didn't have the powerful frame Sairaorg had after a lifetime of training. Training he had followed with zeal ever since he had been cast aside by the Bael clan when he was young for not having that same Power of Destruction.

*But you showed them, didn't you cousin,* Rias thought affectionately as Sairaorg returned the hug. *You showed them that training and skill beat ingrained ability, coming back and beating your younger half-brother like you did to reclaim the Heir position.*

"It's good to see you too, Rias. I don't know all the reasons behind your decision to step down as co-ruler of Kuoh, but I was happy to help."

Rias stepped back, staring up at the taller older boy, crossing her arms under her chest as she did so. "Ahu... really? You? Whose only interest has ever been to get stronger, to prove yourself in the Rating Games? I was pleased when I was told you would be taking over for me, and suspicious too, which hasn't gone away now. What are you up to, you battle junky?"

"Ahahahah! So harsh! But you know, I haven't spent much time in the human world. I figured I might as well spend a bit of time up here..." Sairaorg's words and tones did not fool Rias at all, and a moment later, he sighed and said "...and maybe meet this human who had trained to the point where he could take on Kokabiel without being turned into a devil. That rumors been going around lately, and no one's officially come out and said anything, so..."

At the older youth's words, Rias could not stop herself from wondering how that meeting could go. Her face paled, and she shook her head quickly. "Well, I'm afraid you won't be able to meet him anytime soon. He is actually heading out on a trip tomorrow morning, and he's spending time with his mother tonight."

When Rias had spoken to him a few moments ago about their plans going forward, Ranma had been helping out around the house, repairing some of the damage done when Shampoo had shattered the outer wall, which he hadn't already fixed. He was already supposedly meeting with Mousse, while Asia and Saeko made certain they could come with him on a trip without any repercussions from the Academy for missing a half day's worth of attendance tomorrow.

Seeing the crestfallen expression on Sairaorg's face that he couldn't quite hide, Rias threw him a bone. "And maybe when we return from the mission, you and Ranma can get together for a spar. I know he'd enjoy it." *The surrounding area, not so much.*

At that Sairaorg brightened up, nodding eagerly before becoming serious again. "That's fine. I was only able to get away for an hour this evening to meet you anyway. But I really did want to see you, and ask what really happened between you and Uncle Zeoticus and Aunt Venelana?" Sairaorg stared down at his younger cousin, shaking his head. "I know there's more to it than I've been told about that and about how you finally got out of marrying that asshole,

Riser. Is there a connection there? And why you suddenly want to step down from your position as co-ruler?"

Rias sighed but gestured Sairaorg into a seat on the sofa. "You can get some of the details from Akeno. She'll be staying here to help you get set up here in Kuoh, along with Kiba and Koneko. I'm going to be heading out with Ranma on a kind of recruitment drive." *Both for the government and for my peerage.*

That had caused a bit of an argument earlier. Akeno and Kiba both protested that one of them at least should go with Rias for safety reasons. But Rias had pointed out she wouldn't be alone and that Akeno was her right-hand woman, so she knew all about the various duties and contracts that Sairaorg and his peerage would need to take over. Kiba, in contrast, had a specific reason for not coming: he and Tsubaki were going to go out on a date, and Rias refused to pull him away from it.

She was also going to have to leave Gasper, the last member of her peerage, as it was currently. He was a shut-in whose powers were so strong that even with Rias' help through their peerage connection, he couldn't control it very well. And since that power had to do with time dilation, he was a danger to anyone he encountered. That he didn't really want to meet anyone and preferred to stay inside only reinforced that point.

That was why Koneko was also going to be staying behind. Rias had given her the job of cajoling Gasper out of his hole after they came to the human world, and over the past few months, she had been doing a pretty good job via games and online texts to get him to open up. *They'd even had entire conversations via text... mostly made out of memes, admittedly, but still, progress.* "But for now, I'll tell you what I can, so long as you promise not to air our dirty laundry in public." When Sairaorg nodded, she went on, "You see, my desire to go to school and be co-leader here in Kuoh was highly influenced by..."

**OOOOOO**

The next day found Ranma and Saeko getting Asia up and out of the house more than two hours earlier than normal. They had a long way to go and wanted to be on-site in Hakata Bay by the afternoon. Outside, they found Rika waiting for them at the wheel of what Ranma first took to be maybe a military-level truck. "Okay, that thing looks kind of awesome. But how exactly are you going to drive it in the city?"

"Very, very carefully. For the things I bump into anyway. Trust me, if I bump into something with this thing, it's not this car of mine that suffers," Rika said with a smile.

Ranma could well believe it and when told it was indeed a military-level vehicle, simply nodded his head sagely even as he tried to call dibs on the front side seat. But Mousse sat there in his duck form, staring back at him. "Quack."



Narrowing his eyes, Ranma looked over the chair into the back row of seats, seeing Rias there, a wide smile on her face. "Ready to go on an adventure, Ranma?"

"... Ready to see if there's anything to rumors and legends, anyway. Those aren't always the same thing. Just... most of the time."

A still tired Asia pushed past Ranma, climbing up into the front chair and cuddling Duck-Mousse to her, smiling happily at duck and policewoman alike, beaming with all the energy of a young girl who had very rarely been in cars and never in the front seats. "Ooh, the view once we get to the highway should be magnificent from so high."

As Rika gently ribbed Asia on the fact she might well be asleep before they got to the highway, Ranma stepped back, looking over at Saeko.

Staring into the massive car, Saeko also stared at the redhead, a faint blush appearing on her cheeks. "Mah, so that wasn't a dream last night..." the swordswoman shook herself from head to toe for a moment.

In actuality, Saeko had recovered from her poleaxed state sometime in the evening last night. Training with Ranma, working through katas with him and stealing the occasional kiss had wiped the concerns about this new wrinkle in their relationship out of Saeko's mind. Much like Ranma, she lived for the moment and tended to like to concentrate on whatever training she was doing at the time to the exclusion of everything else.

That didn't last too long after she had gone to bed, though. There, Saeko was plagued with numerous disjointed thoughts and feelings. The ones that floated to the top most often were first, that she was happy with Ranma, happier than she could ever remember being before. She was also aware that, even if Ranma said that he would be willing to give Rias a hard no and set aside his growing affection for her, those feelings would still be there, and Rias would be hurt. While the last wasn't as important as the first, it was there. Couple those concerns with thoughts that kept on bringing up the same cake analogy that Rias had, a few steamy ideas of what being with both of them would be like, and you got a somewhat exhausted Saeko who really hoped the entire day had been a dream.

Now, as he looked between Rias and Saeko, a small, barely visible glimmer in her eyes told him she was enjoying his discomfort a bit as she gestured for Ranma to sit in the middle. "Come now, Ranma, this could be fun, could it not? It will be an interesting experiment, to say the least."

The real meaning in those words was impossible for even Ranma to miss. Saeko was saying that she would use this trip to see if she could truly share Ranma's affections or feel anything towards Rias herself beyond friendly affection. If she couldn't or didn't, then she could say no to Ranma and Rias dating with a clear conscience. What happened after that would be up to the two of them.

Trying hard to not let his hormones control his reaction to that idea, Ranma smiled wanly and sat between the two girls. The car started up, and Saeko instantly went on the attack, perforce making Rias do the same, the two girls both leaning their heads on Ranma's shoulders even as Saeko's grip on his arm started to get a bit painful before slowly releasing. *Oh yeah, this is going to be really... fun... damn it. If I ever meet the deity who took a look at my life and said, 'Let his romantic life be forever complicated,' we will have words!*

### **End Chapter**

This is a bit of a segue chapter. A few conversations and some events had to happen here before we start to explore Japan's mythology. From here on, most of the time in Kuoh will be small bits, mostly romance or slice-of-life-centered. The adventures will begin elsewhere. In particular, in Kyoto...

I also wanted to show how Ranma and Rias have changed, as well as how Saeko is open to seeing women as sexual objects, at least, even if she doesn't have any emotional feelings towards Rias just yet and how conflicted she is about this. Ranma was able to force himself to talk about the triangle openly with the two girls and also shot down the idea of being interested in Koneko. He's not good at it still. Even if he's gotten a handle on romance, conflict in that sphere still makes Ranma want to run and hide. Meanwhile, Rias knows precisely what she wants. Rias is also extremely happy to dump any and all responsibility she can outside of her peerage. I picture her as someone who would really like to be lazy if she could get away with it, so I felt that made sense.