

I'm not Japanese and can't draw.

Howdy, all. For those of you wondering, I rarely post a poll here on fanfic in February, but I do have all three of my polls on patty-on. This story won the Ranma poll thanks to the carry-over effect. This means Stallion will probably win the vote in March.

This is a bit of a segue/romance-heavy chapter, but it also introduces more Highschool of the Dead characters and will show hints of where that particular thread might go. I hope you enjoy it!

This has been edited by Hiryo. I have also attempted to Grammarly it. If you guys see any mistakes, tell me, and I'll catch it before posting it over on fanfic.

Chapter 17: Dates, Devils and Copycats

Thankfully for Ranma's sensibilities (read: blood pressure), neither Rias nor Saeko were willing to flirt openly with him in the car. Even better, Saeko didn't seem to object to Rias sitting next to him, something Ranma had feared, even if Saeko had forced Ranma into the center seat when they got into the car.

Perhaps it was Asia being there. Despite sitting with Mousse's duck form in her lap in the front row, the young nun could still be seen easily enough, her blonde hair bobbing in place as she chattered excitedly to Rika about this being her first trip in a car. "I've never actually been in one before. Are they all this comfy inside? The outside looked a little threatening, but it's nice in here. I thought the seats would be like we found on the train."

Or perhaps it was Rika's presence. The smirk she gave Ranma when they all piled in was somewhat annoying, though. Ranma could see why someone would think his current predicament funny. He'd seen that often enough in Nerima from Nabiki and others. *But does Rika have to be so damn open about it?*

Regardless, while the two girls on either side of him were not flirting with Ranma, the way they both leaned into his side, pressing their chests into his arms, was more than enough to distract him from any attempt to talk for a few minutes as the car began to move. The feel of Saeko or Rias' hair on his neck was also distracting in the extreme. But at least Saeko was only glaring at Rias around Ranma's chest, not actively trying to push her away. Ranma had thought that seeing Rias trying to be affectionate with Ranma would push Saeko into responding negatively.

This didn't seem to be the case. Instead, Saeko was just watching Rias like a hawk, her own thoughts hidden behind a faint, almost plastic-like smile.

As the car navigated its way carefully around the streets of Kuoh to the highway, Asia petted Mousse, looking around at the others. "So, where are we going first?"

"My place. Initially, I thought about just dropping by before heading on, but Shizuka convinced me that we might need to start house shopping here in Kuoh, so we'll be picking her up. And frankly, Ranma..." Here, Rika glanced up at her rearview mirror to stare at Ranma with a deadpan gaze. "I talked to that police friend of yours, Kento. He's told me about some more about your adventures. Given how often you run into trouble, I want to grab as many guns as I can. Just in case."

"Quack, quack, quack!" Mousse spoke up from where he sat on Aisa's lap.

Biting his lip, Ranma held back a snicker. Guns really wouldn't help much against most of his enemies. *Not unless she could see them coming from at least two blocks away. Any closer, and they'll be on her before she can aim a rifle or take out one of her handguns. I might have more respect for the higher caliber type of guns after my day out with the SAT, but the speed of the operator and his or her hand-eye coordination matters just as much as if you can actually do damage when you land a hit.*

"Something funny you want to share with the rest of us, Ranma?" Rika asked, her eyes narrowed, still visible in the mirror, before she turned her attention forward as the light turned green. "It almost sounded like you thought that was funny or something."

"Eh, Nah, nothing like that. Just..." Ranma scrambled for a second, knowing that Rika was really touchy about how little guns could even the playing field between herself and martial artists. But he quickly found something to comment on, "How exactly are ya going to go around with a rifle or something? Even if you have your police badge on ya, won't that draw a crowd?"

"... You have a point, I suppose," Rika allowed, letting the pigtailed one off the hook for now... "But I can bring along a duffle bag at least. And you said that tear gas or something like that would still work, right?"

"Ugh, I know it would work on me," Rias spoke up, pushing off of Ranma's shoulder for a second as she looked at the back of Rika's head. "I would have to cast a spell on myself to keep the gas from getting into my lungs or eyes. It's possible, but if I'm not prepared for such an attack, ugh!" Rias huffed in annoyance and then sat up straighter, thrusting her chest out proudly. "Then again, what exactly you'll do after that is... what exactly? I don't think any handheld gun would do more than bruise a devil at my level or above."

To say nothing about my brother or others like him. I doubt even pure capsaicin to the eyes would bother them or anyone else at that level. No virus, poison or gas would, or else the Old Maou faction would have been able to kill them during the war. Rias knew that the Old Maou faction and New Devil Faction had both occasionally used human-made weapons of mass

destruction, including nukes at times. There was a reason why several levels of the Underworld were no longer being lived in, after all.

“Eh, I don’t know. If the SAT had someone else nearby armed with that, heh, that gun you lot don’t officially have,” Ranma smirked before going on more seriously, “or something larger, you could be in for a few broken bones. And a headshot would still put you in a bad way. It’s hard, impossibly so, but if the humans were able to stack up enough guns in one place, they could hurt ya.”

“Can we change the subject, please?” Asia requested while Rika took a moment to act smug, although only Asia and Mousse could see it. “Where exactly do you live, Minami-san?”

“I’ve told ya before it’s Rika to you, kiddo. Restoring my partner’s leg to him earned you a lot of brownie points in my eyes,” Rika answered, taking a hand off the wheel to reach over and ruffle Asia’s hair, who blushed and ducked her head. “As for where I live, that’s in Tokonosu City. It’s a small port town, but unlike Kuoh, it’s got a port and a large-scale train station where we can take a bullet train straight to Hakata.” She paused, mumbling under her breath for a second, the car now heading up onto the highway. Ranma couldn’t make out what she said, something about her girlfriend and tickets but that was it.

“Tokonosu?” Now it was Saeko’s turn to sit up in surprise, a brief flicker of annoyance appearing on her face as Rias took that moment to lean back into Ranma’s other side. But she set that aside for now. “That’s most interesting, as that is where I live too.”

Rika blinked but didn’t look up from where she was now trying to get over into the center lane on the highway. “Huh, that’s an interesting coincidence.”

“Indeed... in fact, come to think of it, that picture you showed everyone at the party, I didn’t see much of it, but the blonde hair and Akeno’s comment... Your girlfriend’s last name wouldn’t be Marikawa, would it?” Saeko guessed.

“Yep... don’t tell me you went to Fujimi High School? Damn, small world,” Rika whistled. “Did you ever have a teacher named Shido, by any chance?”

“I did, indeed, on both counts. I can’t say I can remember much about Shido-sensei. He always struck me as a bit too... oddly intense and overbearing, but he left me alone. As did most of the local boys.” She glanced at Ranma, her eyes suddenly dancing with a certain light. “That incident I told you about happened before my first year in high school. It gave me something of a reputation.”

“Bah, if none of the idiots couldn’t look past the rumors to get to know ya despite them, that’s their loss, Sachan,” Ranma huffed, reaching out and pulling Saeko into a sideways hug. She smiled at that while Rias pouted a bit but said nothing, just leaning deeper into Ranma’s side.

So happy about Ranma's comment was she that Saeko didn't bother to question why Rika had asked about Shido-sensei in particular. If she had, Rika would have told them all about rumors going around the regular police precincts in Tokonosu she had heard once, about how Shido and his father had both been investigated at one point for corruption and connection to the yakuza, particularly illegal smuggling and drug trafficking. Both areas the yakuza had to be particularly careful of. While smart police inspectors and superintendents would not bother with the small stuff, racketeering, red light district stuff and so forth, gun smuggling, kidnappings, violent crimes and drugs would bring the wrath of god down on the yakuza involved.

However, for some reason, a reason connected to Shido the younger, the investigation had been halted a few months back. Rika didn't know why and was a bit curious, but as SAT wasn't directly involved in investigations, which was just as well, really. Rika knew they were all too gun-happy for that kind of thing, she didn't know much more than rumor.

She said nothing now, though, as Asia asked politely. "And has anyone been to Hakata before?"

"Quack!" Mousse spoke up instantly, raising his neck and looking up at Asia, then around her back at Ranma. "Quack, quack. Quack!"

"Huh..." Ranma hummed, thinking that through as Saeko started in his arm. "Mousse says that we've been through there once, and he stayed there a time. Hakata's near Iki Island, where we all had this race once at a village called Zekkyo. The prize was supposed to be a free trip to China to go to all the hot springs there. We had to wear these weighted yukata and wooden shoes, then got tied together like in a potato sack race, only with metal chains."

"Quack. Quack!" Mousse added, glaring at Ranma, and again, Saeko started once more.

Across from her, Rias just stared at Mousse, still nonplussed at how a duck was able to communicate with quacks that were just, well, quacks! *They don't even change cadence for goodness sake! I have grown up with my devil nature letting me translate any language spoken to me, but even I think this is ridiculous.*

"I did not go there to make points with Shampoo, man! It was all to get a free trip back to China! Even if I had, you know, been able to react to Shampoo, I wouldn't have gone for her. Way too clingy and way too crazy jealous at the drop of a hat," Ranma protested.

"Quack! Quack," Mousse answered, somehow conveying the fact he was staring with a deadpan gaze at Ranma with just his head and neck.

Ranma grimaced. "Alright, Akane was worse. I can't argue, especially after how things ended up between us. Shampoo was still the only one of the four who actually talked about

killing rivals. Even Kodachi would just poison ya a little. And you've seen how she's acted since showing up in Kuoh."

Now it was Mousse's turn to look a little annoyed, somehow conveying that once more in a duck's body with surprising verisimilitude.

"I, I understood one word in four that Mousse was saying there," Saeko muttered wonderingly, her eyes wide before she scowled. "I'm not certain what to think about that."

"I am. Welcome to the crazy..." Rias shook her head. "Well, at least this will be fun." Rias then pulled out a deck of cards from her small bag, which was set on the floor between her legs. "For now, though, does anyone want to play cards?"

"So long as we don't play for money or anything else," Ranma said reluctantly. "I've learned my lesson there, and I know I can't bluff at cards to save my life. Almost literally."

While everyone enjoyed the story about that and hearing the tale about the contest on Ike Island, Ranma's concerns on that score turned out to be all too accurate. He lost badly. However, to everyone's surprise, it wasn't Rias who took the majority of the games. Given how Saeko hadn't played many card games, and Mousse was disqualified after the first game when Ranma spotted he was hiding an entire deck under his wing, the redhead winning big was somewhat expected.

Instead, it was Asia who won the majority of the games.

"I can't understand it!" Rias grumbled. "Seriously, I know that there's no way she's trying to use any cheating, but that's the fifth game she's taken in a row with a flush!"

"Yeah... Are you sure you're not Irish? They're supposed to be the lucky ones, right? Not Italians," Ranma teased.

Asia merely giggled at that. "I suppose it could be that the Holy Father is willing to lend me a little aid in these games of chance."

At that, Rias cocked her head to one side, studying the blonde girl for a moment before shaking her head. Despite everything that had happened since the battle against Kokabiel, the memory of how they had heard God was dead was still fresh in her mind. Nevertheless, it seemed as if Asia's faith had not wavered at all. That impressed Rias, although a small part of her wanted to poke the girl on this point to see if it was simply a matter of faith for Asia or if she just refused to believe Kokabiel had been telling the truth. Rias didn't, though. What would be the point?"

Throughout the rest of the journey, which took around two hours on the highway, the group bar Rika played games, first card games, then games on the phones. Ranma sat those

ones out. While he had watched a lot of people play computer or arcade games before, he had never really gotten into them very far, and his hand-eye coordination was basically a built-in cheat code for most, including the games that the others were playing now. Instead, he closed his eyes and tried to meditate, or rather, tried to ignore the fact that two extremely attractive, altogether lovely girls were on either side of him, pressing into him and occasionally bouncing up and down in place either through sheer enthusiasm as their fingers bashed buttons or in the case of Rias in jubilation. The fact both of them also seemed to be doing it just a little too much, judging by the faint smiles he caught on both of their faces, only made it worse.

Rika saw all this in her rear-view mirror and snickered quietly to herself even as she listened to the radio, bopping her head to some of the music occasionally. When they pulled up inside her apartment's parking lot, it was no surprise to her that Ranma had to take a moment to control himself.

She watched in some amusement as Saeko decided to get out by way of Rias' side. "On this side to open the door."

Instead of waiting for Ranma to move, Saeko decided to just climb over him. Not turning to face him, she lifted herself up by her legs and shimmied directly across his lap, grinding her rear back into his lap, where the semi-obvious arousal he had been sporting for the majority of the trip became exceedingly obvious for just a moment. She sat there, leaning back against him, leaning in to kiss Ranma's cheek.

Before he could turn and deepen the kiss, Saeko scooted on, giggling quietly and shooting Rias a superior look as she finally exited the vehicle. Rias snickered back at her, not taking umbrage at the other woman's actions, which seemed to take some of the sails out of Saeko. A blush infused the swordswoman's features for a second as she once more remembered that Rias wasn't actually competing for Ranma's affection. Rather, she just wanted equal affection from both her Ranma and Saeko.

It seems as if that bit of thinking has yet to truly settle into her mind very well, Rika thought, snorting as she got out on her own side quite easily, giving Saeko's earlier words the lie. "Come on, Ranma, stretch your legs a bit. Although I'd wager you'd want to stretch something else more~," she teased.

That tease went directly over Ranma's head, but both girls took on thoughtful expressions, and Rias began to bite her lip, a sultry expression on her face as she stared at Ranma. Thankfully, the joke also went over Asia's head, although the glare that a red-faced duck was giving her made Rika smile.

Coming out of the Humvee, Ranma glanced around. The car was now sitting in a small, enclosed area, an automatic gate closing behind them. To one side and behind was a concrete brick wall, topped with numerous small potted plants. To one side, an apartment complex of eight two-story apartments resided, looking over an aqueduct at the back separated by the

same wall that made up the back of the parking garage on this side of the building. "Pretty ritzy, Rika," Ranma muttered, shaking his head slightly. "I don't think normal police could afford something like this, could they?"

"SAT aren't normal," Rika answered dryly, not commenting on the fact that she thought that normal police should also be paid a little better too. "And we're a two-income household, anyway. Shizuka is also paid quite well as a private high school nurse. Better than me most months when we don't have any operations going on."

With that, Rika turned aside, gesturing them all to follow her to the entrance to her apartment, the first one on this side of the building. Before she could open the door, the door banged open, and her girlfriend squealed, hurling herself forward. "Rika! You're back! I missed you!"

Perhaps it was the reminder of Rika's girlfriend's occupation. On the other hand, maybe it was because Rias was feeling very silly and jubilant at the moment after such a pleasant drive and the on-again, off-again flirting. Regardless, the first comment Rias made as the door opened and a blonde whirlwind flew out, grabbing Rika in a hug, was, "Helloooooo, nurse!"

Saeko had known what to expect and simply nodded her head sagely before nudging the other girl. "I did not see you as a Looney Tunes fan."

"Hey, I was young once!" Rias shot back, although she was too busy staring to respond to the nudge more than that. "Maou and I thought that she was wearing padding in that picture Rika showed us."

If she had been in a position to, Rika would've scoffed at that. As she was currently having her head pulled into the largest chest any of them had ever seen, that was an impossibility just now.

Shizuka stood at around seven centimeters taller than either Rias or Saeko, who were both a few centimeters taller than Rika. Ranma's female form was even shorter. Whereas Rika was built like a sprinter, with lots of muscle mass on her spare frame, Shizuka seemed to be soft and not just her chest. Judging by her clothing, her legs looked fit enough, but she still had slightly wider hips than any of the girls did, a trim but not toned waist, and kind brown eyes complementing her long blonde hair. Saeko had seen her around numerous times while a student at Fujimi and always felt that Shizuka was a bit of an airhead, never quite all there when talking to her or whenever you interacted with her, except for when it came to dealing with anyone being injured.

But it had to be said because it was the elephant in the elevator. Shizuka's breasts were utterly massive. They were several sizes larger than Akeno's, and whereas, thanks to being a devil, Akeno's chest only had a slight bit of sag to it, Shizuka, who was clearly not wearing a bra at the moment and her breasts did sag more than a little bit. A part of Ranma noted there

actually wasn't all that much sag in comparison to their size, but the rest of him was trying desperately not to get a nosebleed or a hard on the site in front of him. *The woman probably has strong enough back muscles to go toe-to-toe with any martial artist out there.*

Finally pushing her way out of her girlfriend's massive tits and trying hard not to think of ways to get the woman back in such a manner that would satisfy both of them very much, Rika put a scowl on her face as she stared up at her girlfriend. "Dammit, Shizuka, what've I told you about rushing out like that!?"

"Only wear an apron when I do it?" Shizuka answered, not all innocently, causing Rika to blush monstrously, even as Shizuka gently pushed her to the side, smiling and bowing, sending her breasts to jiggle from side to side as she took in the others with Rika. "Hello! I was told that we would be having guests, and I put out enough food for us to have a nice lunch. Please, come in! I'm afraid we can't all eat at the table. The kitchen here is a little too small for so many people, but you can eat in front of the TV or up on the balcony."

"Thank you for having us," Ranma and Saeko answered, Japanese manners coming to the fore, as Rias simply stared, shaking her head from side to side, muttering about finally having met someone who could put her friend Akeno to shame. Mousse was somewhat out of it, his duck eyes wider than his head at present. Asia was also somewhat stunned by the older blonde's... generous proportions, but she hastily copied the other two, coming up out of her but bowed to smile at the blonde nurse, only for eyes to widen as she was lifted up into the blonde's arms, and hugged as if she was a teddy bear. "EEEE!!!"

The squawking from Mousse indicated that he had been caught, too, his long neck sticking out from one side of the hug as Asia's entire head practically disappeared into Shizuka's cleavage as the nurse welcomed the short girl. "And you must be Asia! Is it true you're a magical girl? Then you've got magical healing powers? I don't suppose you know where I could find some of those, do you? I might not be a girl any longer in age, but I'm a girl at heart! Would that count?"

"I think Asia is suffocating. And I don't believe that she could give you any magical powers like that. Although if you do want some, we could perhaps make a deal," Rias said, smile slightly strained now, as Ranma lost the battle to keep all of his blood inside his body and began to drip a little bit from the nose. "Perhaps we could speak again about this after you've put a bra on? And we've gone inside?"

While that hint had been delivered with all the subtlety of a hammer, it seemed to go over the older blonde's head, although she did release Asia. Grabbing Asia's hand in both of hers, Shizuka paused, then released one hand and leaned back inside, grabbing something out of sight.

This turned out to be a water pistol, which Shizuka pointed at Ranma's face instantly. Ranma barely had time to blink before the spritz of water caught him in the face. This initiated

the curse, and Shizuka gasped, clapping her hands together in delight. “Oh wow, it’s true! There really are magic and curses and such! That’s so cool!”

Not noticing the now fulminating glare Ranma was giving her, Shizuka finally turned aside, heading back into the apartment. “Come on in, all of you! By the way, Rika, you have a package, one of those that you told me I’m not supposed to touch. That nice deliveryman offered to bring it in, and I had him do so and drop it over there. Right under the picture of you winning that police academy thing you did.”

Others might not have noticed the faint smirk in Shizuka’s tone when she said those words, but Rias caught it and looked toward where the blonde had gestured to see the picture. In the picture, Rika stood with a rifle as large as she was leaning against her side, holding up a certificate of some kind for the camera. With her superior devil eyesight, Rias could even make out the words sniper specialist special assault team training there and reckoned that whatever thought the deliveryman might have had about getting lucky after dropping off the package with the ditzy blonde would probably have vacated his mind pretty quickly. *Who very obviously isn’t as ditzy as she acts.*

What followed was a nice lunch, although Rika was annoyed to learn that instead of getting them their tickets on the bullet train to Hakata, Shizuka had been busy all day with paperwork at her school to get a week off. Contrary to what Rika had thought, it wasn’t entirely her fault. Several mice had been seen at Fujimi, and she’d been working all morning with the local inspectors to make certain that those mice had been brought in from outside and that the school was still meeting sanitary and health regulations. “I tried to tell you last night, but you weren’t listening.”

Rika leered at her girlfriend, reaching over to give her thigh a squeeze underneath the table. The two of them, Rias and Saeko were sitting at the table in the kitchen, while Asia, the now male Ranma and still in duck form Mousse sat out on the sofa. “I don’t think you said anything coherent at all until well after we were finished for the night. And you know that I can never remember what we say during pillow talk anyway.”

Shizuka giggled at her girlfriend as both girls across from them wondered if this was what happily wedded bliss was like, minus the rings, of course. Then Shizuka went on saying that she was still able to find a time when the bullet train would be leaving, at around four in the afternoon, she just hadn’t bought the tickets yet. That meant that they had more than three hours to kill and that they would be arriving at around eight in Hakata.

Hearing that, Rias quickly got on her phone. She had decided to take over planning out their stay in Hakata when Ranma had blandly informed her that they would simply be staying in a tent in a random park. While the others might be fine with that, and Rias could rough it just like the rest of them, if there was no need to do so, she certainly wasn’t going to go out of her way to live in a tent. More importantly, she was forced to use public restrooms when she had more than enough money to pay for a few nights and a good hotel.

“In that case, I will take the time to stop in and see my father. He and I have been in communication over the phone numerous times, of course, but there is something to be said about seeing him in person,” Saeko said, pushing herself to her feet now that the meal was done. “Do you want to accompany me, Ran-kun?” she questioned, smiling demurely. “It might be a good idea to reintroduce yourself to my father as my boyfriend, you know.”

Ranma looked terrified for a second, shaking his head rapidly, and when he spoke up, it almost sounded like he had changed back into his female form. “Nope! Er, that is, no thanks, Sachan. You, um, you go and have family time.” As Saeko began to giggle, Asia deliberately turned in his chair, looking out into the sitting room instead of the laughing quartet of women in the kitchen. “Anything you want to do, Asia?”

Asia’s answer was interrupted by a firm quack from Mousse, who hopped up from his seat, waddled over into the kitchen and then threw it towards the bathroom. “Mousse wants to change back into his male body if we’re gonna stay here for a bit,” Ranma translated. “Since I already used the opportunity myself, I can’t really argue with the guy. And can I say I’m happy that Shizuka’s not gone the normal route of changing me back and forth a few times? That’s always annoying.”

“Does Mousse have any clothing other than that Chinese outfit of his? He’s going to stick out like a sore thumb in that,” Rias said, shaking her head.

“Ask him yourself when he comes back out. How’m I supposed to know? It’s not like we talk fashion or anything.” Ranma fake gagged as he said those words, causing everyone else there to laugh.

Asia hesitantly asked if they could maybe stop in at a store that sold under things, poking her fingers together and looking everywhere but at Ranma and the others. “I noticed this morning, and at first, I did want to bring it up, but the bra I am currently wearing is a little tight...”

Shizuka was about to volunteer for that, but Rika vetoed it, pointing at her. “Oh no, you don’t, you get to sit your butt right there and buy the tickets for us, and then we both’re going to go over the paperwork for your sabbatical. It sounds as if your school’s going to be starting back up this Monday, and I don’t want you to have a mark on your record or anything.”

“Moh, Richan, you know that I’m horrible with phones and stuff, let alone paperwork,” Shizuka protested.

“I know, which is why I’ll be staying here with you to help. That, and that box hopefully holds what I hope it does.” She smirked a bit, looking sideways at Ranma. “I will want to put it together and have Mousse hold onto it for me for later. In fact...”

She broke off as Mousse appeared, causing Shizuka to hum in delighted amusement as she looked at the admittedly bishounen boy. "My, he really does transform from a duck! I am going to want to watch the change happen sometime, like you mentioned, Ranma. Watching you change was stunning, but seeing both curses in action would be fun!"

"If you spend any time around us, that is almost a certainty, Healer, Regardless of your splashing us yourself," Mousse said, bowing from the waist. All healers were honored by the Amazon Tribe, magical or not. "Did I hear my name earlier?"

"You did. I was hoping to ask you if I could use your expanded space to hold some of my... things," Rika said.

"By 'things' I assume you mean guns of some sort. Certainly, I can store them. Although I'll warn you, getting them back out will be nearly random. I don't typically organize my weapon space, and doing so will take me about an hour's worth of meditation."

"Do it for half," Ranma said, causing Mousse to look at him quizzically. "You've got weapon space in both of your long sleeves, right? And your pockets and at the bottom of your pantleg, right?" When Mousse nodded, Ranma shrugged. "Then organize only one sleeve and put stuff you want to get a hand on quickly there, plus Rika's weapons. You can keep the rest as is and still keep using surprise as a main component of your style."

"I'm always amused by how smart you can sound when anything martial arts related comes up. Then the topic changes to something else, and the illusion is gone," Mousse taunted.

Ranma flipped him the bird, and the others all laughed, bar Asia, who was stealing glances towards Mousse with a faint blush on her face. The boy was indeed quite handsome, especially now that he didn't need to wear glasses, even though being around Ranma had somewhat inured Asia to being around handsome boys. But there was something about the slightly more effeminate looking to Mousse, and coupled with his overall courtesy towards her that made Asia take notice of him more.

She shook her head as Ranma and the others came out of the kitchen, with Rika and Mousse heading upstairs and Shizuka pouting as she pulled out her phone. She held it well away from her body and began to tap at the buttons slowly, her face scrunched up in effort.

"Come on, Asia, let's get some walking in," Ranma said, cutting off her view of the older blonde as he reached down to help her along.

"And we can go shopping for you as well," Rias said, ruffling Asia's hair affectionately. The four of them exited the house, with Saeko breaking off quickly, heading in one direction, while Ranma and the others headed in the other towards where Rika had told Ranma they would find a large park.

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Saeko walked down the streets, smiling faintly as she recognized houses and other landmarks, feeling somewhat nostalgic but with no real urge to remain coming over her. *While this place might've been where I grew up and my family's house will always remain my first home, where my home is currently is wherever Ranma goes.*

The truth of that thought washed over Saeko then, and her smile turned tender, happy in the depth of the emotional connection she had forged with the other martial artist before a faint frown came to her face as she remembered the recent stone thrown into the works of the relationship that was Rias, her recent actions and declaration of intent. *I cannot deny that a portion of me would be very happy to... Experiment a bit in that direction, and Rias is certainly immensely attractive. If I did not think so, I would have trouble seeing Ranma in a similar light in his female form. But, but am I truly happy to share Ranma's affections with her? To share my own affections with her rather than just with Ranma? The car ride was... all right, and I know I put Ranma in that position, but that is a far cry from truly thinking we could create a relationship of equals between three people instead of two, and I still had issues with it.*

Despite knowing intellectually that Rias wasn't trying to push Saeko away from Ranma, or to end the relationship so she could move in on Ranma herself, Saeko had dealt with more than a few moments of jealousy during the trip here. *Although I did feel more surges of amusement and arousal than simple jealousy, Saeko admitted. Will my jealousy fade or grow stronger over time?*

Saeko was not as at home with her emotions and thinking them through as many other girls her own age were, something Saeko would readily admit. On the other hand, when she decided on a course of action, she kept with it, something that similarly very few young women her age could say. Now she reminded herself of that, as well as the fact that she had already told Ranma that she would see where at least a week took them before making a final decision on whether or not Rias could join their relationship. *While a part of me would very much cheerfully close the door on that idea right now, I don't want to cause bad feelings between myself and Rias, whose friendship I at least have come to treasure. And putting a lid on those kinds of emotions, on both their parts, since Ranma admitted he was attracted to her, would be far more difficult in practice than simply saying it. No, the best thing I can do is merely see where this takes us and view it with an open mind. This means I shouldn't be annoyed that Ranma decided to go walking with her and Asia rather than accompanying me to meet my father again. I will twit him about how scared he looked when I brought up the idea, though.*

She giggled to herself as she came to the street leading to her house, a large place built along the same lines as the Tendo Estate, although smaller in nature because it did not have a back garden, only the connected dojo. She waved at a few neighbors who looked back at her, seemingly startled by her presence, but Saeko ignored that in favor of continuing towards her house, only to cock her head thoughtfully as a man stood there already, ringing the doorbell.

At the corner in front of her house, behind him, a police car waited, and the man held himself as a policeman would despite wearing a suit rather than a uniform. *Some kind of police inspector? What is he doing here?*

She reached the door before it could open and smiled politely at the man. "Good afternoon, officer. Do you have business with the Busujima family as a whole, or simply my father in person?"

The man started, whirling towards her, his eyes wide with surprise, the stern, almost condemning image on his face shifting as he took in her looks while the door behind him opened. "Saeko Busujima? But, that is...."

He seemed to gather himself as her father opened the door, looking at both of them, a faint smile on his face as he took in the chagrined expression on the policeman's face, as well as his daughter's presence. The policeman looked between them, then seemed to gather himself quickly, shaking his head wryly and bowing here his head in token of some kind of apology towards her father. "Your pardon Busujima-san."

Tesoro Busujima simply nodded, and the inspector turned back to her, smiling a little wider but still with an edge of concern and confusion. "Your pardon, but when you disappeared, Busujima-kun, your school did not believe you had left of your own volition. Your father informed us that you had transferred, but the school had no record of it, and our own attempts to look up such matters failed."

Saeko's brows furrowed, and she shook her head in confusion, happy to move the conversation inside as her father gestured both of them inside. As her father led the way inside, she pondered the inspector's words. "You will pardon me, but that sounds extremely unusual. I had my father's full permission to transfer to Kuoh Academy, and even if I did not, I am eighteen, so I could have transferred even without that." *So long as I could have paid, anyway.* "It offers a unique educational experience, one that is at a far higher level than Fujimi. I applied for and received permission to transfer both from Fujimi and to Kuoh. In fact, I can simply call Kuoh now if you wish to look at the paperwork. Unless you have broken the fax machine again, Father," she teased.

Her father huffed in irritation at that but said nothing. While he wasn't nearly as bad with phones as Shizuka seemed to be, it was a fact that computers and other more high-tech devices did not like the Busujima patriarch and vice versa. "Why don't you do so, daughter? I honestly should've thought of that. I apologize for wasting both our time, Detective Miyamoto."

Saeko hummed thoughtfully. "Miyamoto, I seem to remember a girl on the field hockey team at Fujimi of that name."

"My daughter. She goes to your school as well. And even if you had been able to show me the paperwork from Kuoh, it might not have been enough to make me give up the case," the

inspector, Tadashi Miyamoto, admitted. "When we went back to Fujimi after talking to you the first time, Busujima-san, they could not give us any such paperwork at all and again repeated the fact that you simply had disappeared, not coming to school any longer for some reason." The policeman scowled angrily. "I am now thinking that this entire thing has been a...a hoax of some kind, a practical joke maybe, that went well out of bounds."

There was evidently something else that he was also thinking, but neither Busujima-san decided to push on it, although Saeko suddenly remembered that Rika had mentioned Shido-sensei out of the blue earlier that day. *Could there be something nefarious going on with him?*

"Can you remember who left the school you dealt with for their share of the paperwork to transfer to Kuoh?" Tadashi requested.

"I am afraid I cannot. But it surely will appear on the paperwork when we have it."

This took but a few moments to call the Academy, as well as give them the house's fax number, before turning back to join her father and the inspector sitting at the small sitting table. "So, you thought I was kidnapped then? And judging by the look on your face when I first saw you at our door, you assumed my father had something to do with it?"

When she first spoke, Saeko almost sounded amused, but her words ended on a far chillier note, and the inspector, although made of quite stern stuff, shivered a bit, stopping his hand from going up to his collar to loosen it with an effort of will. *This girl can sound even scarier than Kiriko!* "Unfortunately, that is precisely what I'm saying. Given the fact that you personally were not seen at school after you started the transfer process and did not even stop in to clear out your locker or anything similar, there were grounds for concern among the student population. We were called in by the School Department when no paperwork showing your transfer turned up, and we finally began to investigate seriously two days ago. But if you are telling me that you were transferred, then it seems as if someone is playing games here, and I do not like it."

"In that case, you will obviously extend a formal apology to my father for the trouble you have given? I cannot imagine what our neighbors think, seeing a police car pull up outside of our house like that several days in a row," Saeko said, scowling.

"I will, although, you have to admit is somewhat unusual. Not only is it an unusual time of year to transfer, but no one at school could remember you saying anything whatsoever about wanting to transfer. All they knew was that you had left one weekend, gone to a martial arts exhibition, and not come back. As far as we could tell, no rumors of your actually transferring anywhere ever reached the student body."

"I remember speaking to a young woman there over the phone and then a teacher of some kind. I'm afraid I am not good with names, although I am uncertain that the man ever actually gave me one in the first place," Tesoro mused.

“While we are waiting, if you could try to remember anything about either voice, that would be a help on my end. And as for you, Ms. Saeko, might I ask what brought about your sudden decision to transfer schools?” Tadashi admitted. “As I said, it seemed incredibly sudden to your acquaintances and friends at school.”

“Acquaintances only,” Saeko interjected, snorting. “I had no real friends among the student body at my old school, acquaintances or followers only. Even the girls on the Kendo Team were but colleagues. None of them took the Art as seriously as I do.”

Tadashi slowly nodded, hearing the capital ‘A’ when Saeko mentioned the Art, frowning in some puzzlement. Nevertheless, his musings were interrupted as the fax machine went off. He turned in that direction, standing up before either father or daughter could, waving them back down into their cushions. The first paper would have the information he wanted most, the names of the people who handled the paperwork for Fujimi.

This proved to be the case, and he first frowned a little, then scowled angrily as he took in the two names. “Well, one minor mystery is cleared up... And maybe a second larger one given another brick,” he murmured seemingly to himself.

“And I’m certain you will share this with us now?” Tesoro practically demanded. It was clear to Saeko that, while he had been determined not to bother her with this matter, he did not like the way Miyamoto’s investigation had impugned upon his honor.

Looking up at them, the inspector looked a little conflicted for a moment and then sighed. “As I was almost to the point of officially investigating you for the disappearance of your daughter, I suppose I can share this. I and several other inspectors have been looking into Ichirou Shido on grounds of possible connections to criminal enterprises. I now believe that his son, who was one of the two people who handled your paperwork, lost that paperwork and did all he could to convince the police to launch this investigation into your disappearance and to assign me to do it in order to throw me off the trail. I doubt we’ll ever be able to prove it, particularly since Miss Nahunta moved to America to marry her boyfriend there, and she was the other one who handled your paperwork.”

“And thus both I and my daughter became but pawns in this game, innocent victims in a game of delaying tactics,” Tesoro growled out. *I may have to talk to some of my own acquaintances about this...*

“A game that succeeded.” Miyamoto slumped, shaking his head. “I learned this morning that the investigation into Ichirou Shido was being put on hold. Word from on high. We could have pushed it through with but a few more days, but in that same time frame, Ichirou was able to kill it. Damn it!”

“By which you mean someone in the political sphere became aware of and decided to cancel the investigation.” Busujima-san shook his head dryly. “That is not good.” *Yet also gives*

me more ammunition to pass on to Souichiro. And he does owe me several favors. It might not all be legal, but I can express my displeasure on this point I think.

His daughter was thinking much the same thing, only without any type of subtlety whatsoever.

“Well, I do not need any investigation or anything else official to make my displeasure of our family being brought into this, however peripherally known to anyone involved should I meet them,” Saeko grumbled before blinking as the realization that she was actually thinking of assaulting a teacher came to her. *Well, a teacher and his father, really, but that was just more of the same. Ranma’s attitude toward authority figures is rubbing off on me, it seems.*

“I will pretend that I didn’t hear that,” the inspector stated dryly. “For now, I do have a few more questions on my end that will at least allow me to stop any move to further investigate your transfer in its tracks. If you don’t mind?”

“And then, daughter, I hope you have time to show me what you have learned. The pursuit of the Art, not any other type of education, is what drove you to transfer to Kuoh, after all,” Tesoro stated calmly.

Saeko’s eyes blazed with eagerness, and she turned her gaze back to the investigator, who suddenly felt what it was like being between a tigress and a meal she very much wanted to partake in. “Yes, Father! Inspector, if you could ask your questions, please? I’m afraid I only have a few hours free before I must catch a train.”

OOOOOO

With Saeko gone and Mousse busy with the pair of older women, Asia, Rias and Ranma headed to a park. Rias was busy on her phone for much of the time they spent walking, standing on one side of Ranma while Asia smiled and looked around, interested to see how different Tokonosu was in comparison to the other Japanese cities she had seen. In many ways, it was more like a more high-tech version of Nerima in that it was set up in a very organized manner and built around several aqueducts. In this case, though, it wasn’t organized to separate old-fashioned from modern or market-type areas from homes. There was an actual river, too, around which the town was built, leading down to a small port area. Saeko had crossed that river to head to her father’s home.

The trio stayed on the same side of the river as Rika’s apartment, moving along the river for a time before cutting away, following a series of smaller streets and signs for a large park. There, they found a regular city park combined with several sports fields. Several small cafes were around the park, along with other shops.

All along the walk, the three of them had drawn some gazes from the passersby. Rias was a stunningly gorgeous woman who made most of the women in the world seem plain in

comparison. Asia might be dressed normally in a bright yellow dress that covered her from neck to ankle, but her cute face and happy expression also brought attention.

And between them was Ranma. While some women might think him handsome, none of the people staring at Rias like hungry wolves at a steak or those who watched Asia avidly even noticed he existed.

This wasn't all that unusual, of course, nor did any of the trio take any notice at first.

Asia was oblivious to the stares she was getting, too busy first looking around as they walked and then, to Ranma's amusement, joining a few kids in the sandbox to help create a series of mountains and rivers. Evidently, Asia had enjoyed her time at the beach doing that with Koneko.

For her part, Rias was very used to being stared at as one of the two Great Ladies of Kuoh. Plus, she had something else on her mind. "You know, you don't have to watch her so intensely here?" Rias said, leaning into Ranma's side, putting her phone away to hug him around the waist. "We could go off by ourselves a bit, just take in the sights..."

"If Mousse was here to watch Asia-chan, we might. But she seems to attract trouble like I do rivals and crazies," Ranma quipped, looking down at her, blushing faintly but not moving away. That was great progress in Rias' mind, even if Ranma seemed rather embarrassed and off balance. "And, er, in my mind, while Saeko seems to've given her okay for us to see if this whole three-way thing works, we need to make certain the triangle aspect works before you and I get closer if that makes sense."

"Hmm... yes and no," Rias mused, moving away from him for a moment, turning her eyes back to Asia, who was now sitting among four kids, talking animatedly to them. As she watched, one, a pink-haired girl, stood up and seemed to pose like a hero with her hand outstretched, holding a sword, and Rias giggled before turning back to Ranma. "Yes, I think we need to do more as a trio. That's part of why I wanted to go on this trip with the two of you. But you and Saeko have gone on several dates and had a lot of romantic moments, right?"

"Er, I wouldn't call it a lot, or really dates, most of 'em. But yeah, we've had some moments." A silly grin appeared on Ranma's face for a second as he remembered those moments before it disappeared, as he spotted something gleaming where there shouldn't be anything. Kneeling down, Ranma picked up a small pebble, bouncing it in his hand as he stood up.

Rias took the opportunity to bounce a bit in place, causing Ranma to gulp for a second as his head was level with her chest. "Er, are you saying you want to catch up to her or something? That seems a bit too... clinical or planned, I guess?"

"It might seem like that. But I really just want to spend time with you. Is that so wrong?" Rias asked, pouting.

"I guess not." Ranma turned away for an instant, the tiny stone in his hand winging off towards a group of bushes under a tree near the play area, bouncing on the ground and then upwards again. A scream of pain came from within the bushes, even as Ranma turned back, smiling at Rias. "How about this? Tonight, when we arrive at Hakata, Mousse can watch Asia, and you, me and Saeko can go around doing the tourist thing like you said you wanted to in the car."

While playing cards, Rias had explained what she had looked up in Hakata. There were a few normal tourist-type things to do, but one in particular, in Fukuoka, which Hakata was a part that had caught Ranma's attention as being particularly romantic. *Now, going there with two girls is going to be an interesting experience, but whatever. People's opinions are like their assholes. Everyone's got one. That doesn't mean I need to care.*

Rias ignored the sight of a man falling out of the bushes, clutching at his very small, private pain, smiling up at Ranma and giving him a light kiss on the cheek. "That sounds lovely, but so does just walking along like this. Planned-out dates are fun, but spontaneous moments of closeness are just as good."

"Well, I can do spontaneous... heh, in fact, ya might regret asking for that," Ranma quipped as his arms went around her stomach, one hand on the small of her back, the other a bit higher. "If anything, I'm way happier with spontaneity than planning."

"Bring it on!" Rias said, giggling before she saw a few people kneeling next to Ranma's victim out of the corner of her eye. The first few went to help him but then spotted his professional pervert's camera, and their tone instantly changed. "What did you do to him?"

"I can throw a fastball so fast that the air friction can cause the ball to catch fire. It's a trick I learned from Happy. Now, think how fast I could throw something even smaller without trying." Ranma chuckled grimly, leading Rias away from the scene of the crime. "And now think about that hitting, even on the bounce, a pervert busy taking pics of kids right where it hurts the most."

"Justice comes in a very small, painful package," Rias snickered. "Although you might want to make certain Asia doesn't heal him."

Ranma glanced over to Asia, but she was still busy with the sandbox and hadn't noticed the man whimpering well behind her. "Eh, it doesn't seem as if she noticed."

The two of them kept walking around, keeping in sight of Asia but moving around the playground and a small fountain before walking on, still in sight but further away now. Rias once more leaned into Ranma's side as he put his arm around her shoulders.

Their walk quickly brought them close to a baseball field, where a group of high schoolers were practicing. And it was here where the response of the locals to Rias became too loud and too rude to ignore when many of the players, on the outside of the protective cages, turned, whistling at Rias. "Damn girl, work those legs!"

Like Asia, Rias was wearing a skirt. Only Rias's skirt barely came down to her knees, and on her body, it looked way more sexual than it really should. The fact the top showed off a generous amount of cleavage simply added to it, as Ranma, after several hours sitting next to her in the Humvee, could attest to. Indeed, walking along with her like this, Ranma had the devil of a time, pun intended, of keeping his eyes trained on her face.

"Those legs might be fine, but damn, check out her tits! Not as big as the nurse's but bigger than Yuuki or Takagi!" caroled another.

"Come on over here, babe, leave that wannabe Jackie Chan behind and see what real men are like," a third shouted.

Other, far more ribald comments followed, but Rias' answer cut through their words like they were nothing. Yet, for all that, she sounded almost jolly, like someone who had just heard a great joke. "You? Real men? HAHAHAHAHAHAA!!"

With that, she turned away, saying nothing more, just walking off, making a point of swinging her hips as she did, still laughing as the group of baseball players all fell silent, staring after her in anger.

Ranma went with her, shaking his head. "Ouch. They're gonna need Asia to heal them from that burn, Richan."

"Mmm.... Richan. I like that. As for my reaction to that, well, it isn't something I would have done as a Great Lady. There, I would simply ignore such gauche men... and watch as the rest of the school attacked the lot of them." Rias giggled, for real, this time. "And besides, for most people who try to pride themselves on their manliness or what have you, derision and satire are often the best ways to deal with them."

Her good humor took a bit of a hit, though, as she saw Asia moving towards the wounded would-be pervert. "Drat. Do you want to intercept Asia?"

Ranma also scowled, and the two of them hastened their steps. Intercepting Asia just as she was about to reach the group of men and highly affronted women around the pervert, Ranma hastily explained why the pervert was... damaged currently.

But Asia simply shook her head, wagging a finger at Ranma. "Even if he was so lost to the sin of lust, you should not have hurt him so, Ranma-nii. And I will still heal him. Afterward, he can at least stand up straight to answer for his sins."

Rolling his eyes, Ranma whistled loudly. "Let the lady through, boys and girls."

The group did so, frowning even as they automatically obeyed the voice of authority, which caused Ranma to visibly bite back a snicker. Asia walked through, her hand glowing as Rias prepared her own magic, dulling the minds of everyone watching.

While Asia and Ranma might not see a need to keep magic a secret, I certainly am not going to be involved in letting that cat out of the bag, the redhead mused.

Rias had done this hundreds of times before, erasing the minds of people who had seen magic or evidence of her peerage being devils over the years. Koneko hadn't always been so good about keeping her ears hidden or Kiba his speed down to what a normal person could be. So she had gotten very good at wiping the minds of normal people, almost as good as making certain their supernatural fights always occurred in a pocket plane.

Thus, it would have astonished Rias that one of the minds in the area did not succumb to her magic.

Well behind Rias, near the baseball bleachers, a middle-aged man with swept-back black hair and glasses watched, frowning in puzzlement for a second. Then his eyes widened in shock as he stared at where a young foreign girl was kneeling beside someone else, holding out a green glowing hand.

"Whatever is that..." he murmured, looking around slowly to not bring attention to himself. None of the others nearby seemed to have noticed. Not even the three youths that had angrily charged off after the gorgeous-looking redhead and her companions had.

They surely should have. Blinded by anger or not, they should be able to see the glow from that young girl's hands from so much closer to the scene than I am here. But they have slowed down, in fact... have they stopped in place? What is going on here?

Musing on that, the middle-aged man turned back to a few of the other baseball club members, who were grumbling to themselves. None of them would be able to see the glow from where they were, but they had seen and been reduced to sputtering, angry dogs by the redhead's repartee. *And since she seems to be doing something as well...* "While I am not condoning being so ill-mannered as to say that wolf-whistling at that young woman was warranted, her response did denigrate your fellow students. And through them, Fujimi High School. Something I abhor. Perhaps you should help them teach her the error of their ways? I will be carefully looking in the other direction."

A second later, the years of subtle mental conditioning and training to act like the young ruffians they were took effect, and the two men rushed off to join their friends. "Hai, Shido-sensei!"

Remaining where he was, Koichi Shido moved into the shadow of the bleachers, watching intently, still wondering why no one else had seen anything unusual and hoping to test to see if there was more going on here that he could not discern. *What was that light? What did it do, and what did that redhead do? Tsunoda and the other two have started forward again, but they were surely frozen in place, as were the others around the man on the ground...*

“Oy, you bitch, you think you can just laugh at us and walk away like that?”

Asia looked up from where she had finished healing the man who had apparently been taking pictures of her and the younger children. Seeing they were not talking to her but to Rias, she backed away rapidly while the crowd around the pervert also backed away, looking worried as the speaker and his friends were all holding baseball bats.

“Oh? Did my questioning your manhood make you think you had a chance to actually prove it?” Rias taunted, showing no concern.

Looking at the young men facing them, Ranma sent a deadpan look Rias’ way, ignoring the sight of two more joining them. “You know, if you were really trying to calm things down or whatever, riling these idiots up like that is the exact opposite.”

“OY, you stay out of this, fuck face! We just want a few minutes with the girl or at least an apology!” The apparent leader of the group, a man whose blond hair obviously came out of a bottle, growled, “And don’t think your ‘I have kung-fu’ looking ass will matter much. There’s five of us, and we’ve got bats.”

“Bats?” Ranma darted forward, grabbing at the end of a bat one of the idiots was tapping against his shoulder as he tried to glare at Ranma. “You mean these bats?”

“Hey, you, fu, I, what the hell.... I can’t...” The guy quickly began to try to raise the shaft of the bat against Ranma’s hand but got nowhere. Straining with all his might didn’t even make Ranma’s hand shake where it was pressing the head of the bat into his shoulder.

“And you say **I’m** not good at diffusing moments like this?” Rias snorted, then took a step forward towards one of the men who had made to raise his bat towards Ranma. She grabbed him by the wrist, twisted around, and flung him through the air, almost as if he weighed a little to nothing. Which, to her, he did. The man yelped as his head rammed into the side of the slide inside the playground a yard away.

Ranma twitched away from one bat, then allowed another to slam into his side, looking over at the bottle blonde who had used the bat. “You know, at first, I was wondering if you guys really would try to attack us for Rias laughing at you all. Really damn petty of you. Now I’m just amused by how stupid ya are.” Ranma’s other hand came down, clamping that back into place, and then he leaped upwards, kicking out hard. Both Blondy and Ranma’s first example flew backward from kicks to their chests.

Landing, Ranma ducked under another blow, watching as Rias turned from her own first victim to grab that man's arm, hurling him over to where his friend lay. Nearby, several people began to pull out phones to take pictures while other members of the sports team began to make their way out from the baseball field where they had been practicing.

Seeing this, Ranma picked up the blonde guy and hefted him into the air by his shirt as if he weighed next to nothing. "Here, catch!"

The first group out from behind the safety cage grunted as the body of the blonde slammed into them. This was followed by the rest of the original group being tossed in the same direction, with several of them still awake to protest this.

"Don't do it you Fucckkkerrrr!!"

"Oh, come on! This is unreal!!!!"

"What the hell are you doingGGG!!"

By the time the last body landed on the pile of groaning young men, none of the rest of the baseball team had any wish to mess with Ranma, and laughter abounded from the watchers, even though many of them still wondered how Ranma and Rias were able to do that.

Ranma grinned at the crowd, making a muscle pose for a second. "Martial arts, folks. Does a body good."

Sighing theatrically, Rias turned away from Ranma, gesturing for Asia to join her. "Come on, Asia. One way or the other, I think we've overstayed our welcome in this particular park. You said something about going shopping for bras, right?"

Asia spluttered and blushed, and Rias put an arm over her shoulder, cooing at how cute she was, while Ranma groaned but followed behind them dutifully.

Behind them, Shido stared after them thoughtfully. *So, do we have one magic-using woman and her two bodyguards? But no, it was the redhead who did something to everyone's minds but mine. Did she just not see me? Or...*

As he began to speculate on that point, Shido suddenly became aware of a heat building up in one of his pockets. Grimacing, he reached inside, pulling out a flyer that some stupid person had thrust into his hands earlier that day. He stared at it for a moment, watching the symbols on it slowly fading, then returning, fading, then returning as the paper cooled down significantly in his hand.

Swiftly, the only words left were 'make your desires reality' followed by a phone number. Quickly memorizing the phone number, Shido put the paper back in his pocket, then moved

forward to help untangle the pile of young baseball players. This demanded some kind of follow-up, and now he knew where to start, at least.

OOOOOO

Unaware of the fact that her area of effect memory modification spell had been blocked by another family's devil contract, acting as a shield on the individual who held it, Rias took Asia out to get a new set of bras and panties for herself. Due to the time crunch, they were working under, this didn't involve any teasing for Ranma, something Ranma surprisingly found himself of two minds about as the three of them headed back to the apartment complex.

There, they found Shizuka and Rika ready to go, with Rika arming the apartment's security cameras and other things. Ranma figured that was simply sensible, considering how many guns she had stored here. Something Mousse agreed with by a hiss of, "And I thought Tiger had an unhealthy obsession with swords. You should have seen how many guns this woman has."

"No thanks. That's not my thing, man." Ranma snickered, idly wondering about how many guns Mousse had on his person right now. *Come to think of it, how the heck does he keep his weapons space when he transforms from one form to another. My girl form at least retains clothes.*

The last to arrive was Saeko, and she arrived slightly out of breath but quite happy for all of that, as she detailed to Ranma how she had been able to best her father surprisingly easily during their spars. "He didn't seem all that happy about it, muttered about how he needed some retraining of his own, but I think that was just a bit of pique. I think Father was quite proud of me, which makes me very happy how this day has gone, to say nothing about how stopping by allowed me to circumvent a growing trouble for him that was quite unusual."

She looked at Rika for a moment but decided not to elaborate just yet on that. She would do so when she had the SAT officer alone, but for now, it was time for them to get going. It took them about thirty minutes to walk to the train station, where they were just in time for the bullet train to Hakata. Considering that Hakata and the greater Fukuoka area were part of Kyushu, not Tohoku, it would take even train hours to get there.

That travel was spent quite pleasantly. The seats on a bullet train were all comfortable, and you could even buy small snacks or drinks from small concession stands.

As they began their trip, Shizuka pulled out a Monopoly board game, challenging them all to a game. This proved to be a poor decision, as Rias proved that while she couldn't be Asia in cards, no one could beat her when it came to games like Monopoly. She was ruthless and understood the economy of the game far too well.

Ranma bowed out of the game entirely, simply sitting and meditating for a time, trying to work through a new trick he'd thought up over the past few days, dealing with the magical potential he had connected to Jusenkya as he was. It wasn't anywhere near ready to be used, but there was a possibility here. *If I can visualize spells as simple concepts and then...*

When the game was done, Asia and Shizuka began to talk about medical school and being a nurse, while Rika napped.

Seeing this as an opportunity, Rias pulled Saeko and Ranma into a conversation about their destination. "I haven't been able to discover much about this weapon beyond what you were able to, Ranma, at least not on the normal Internet. There are only a few mentions of it in ancient mythological texts, nothing concrete. But the Demon Web had a bit more to say about Shinrai no Ha (Divine Lightning Blade). Apparently, the weapon does exist and was used by a devil at one point but wasn't made by him."

"What devil, and what do you mean when you say the Shinrai no Ha wasn't made by him. If it was not made by this devil or at least his clan, where did it come from, then?" Saeko asked, looking interested.

"As to the individual devil, Drali was a member of the original Lucifer clan, a weak one apparently, but a fierce fighter for all that. The sword was described as being part of why he was so good at fighting in the few records that mention it at all. What that means, I don't know. Unfortunately, while devils may have helped humans develop bureaucracy, it took us until my brother became Maou to create the Demon Web," Rias admitted ruefully. "There's a lot of stuff that isn't on it just yet. I'm sorry that isn't as helpful as you might've hoped. But Shinrai no Ha is a real weapon, and it really does exist. Whether or not we'll be able to find it, I don't know. The snippet of a historical text I found said that Shinrai no Ha was reclaimed by a Shinto monk, but what came of it after that, I have no idea. Although I do know what it looks like."

With that, she pulled out a picture of the sword in question. It wasn't a very good one, as it was simply a painting rather than an actual photograph, and it was very stylized. But it still showed enough of the blade to tell Saeko that it was an odachi rather than a regular katana in length. The odachi was too big to be used for anything but battle, replacing the spear of a warrior on foot, with the shorter katana being used only in one-on-one duels or ceremonies in ancient times. Modern bokken or kendo swords were modeled after katanas, but that had more to do with the social status of the katana than what was used historically in actual combat. Even someone like Saeko, who was proud of her samurai blood, knew that.

It seemed to have an odd chip taken out of the tip of the blade, but the rest of the tip still looked sharp. The hilt was done up in some kind of leather colored dark blue on light blue as if to symbolize the sky and sea meeting. By the gleam of the blade, it was also double-bladed, which was very much **not** usual for any type of Japanese sword.

"It's beautiful looking, but I can't tell what kind of scale it is on. The overall shape is enough to tell me what kind of blade it is, but was it built for human hands, giant or divinity? Many of the Shinto Gods were on a far larger scale than most humans ever achieve," Saeko said worryingly.

"If it isn't, we can always figure something else out. Like we're trying to do with those weapons we confiscated from the exorcists," Rias said soothingly.

"And remember, this is only the first trip out. We might not be able to strike gold here, but there are a lot of legends out there, and not all of them can lead to dead ends or irritations like the ones I've run into in the past," Ranma added.

Saeko smiled at them both, then looked at Rias thoughtfully before leaning sideways into Ranma's shoulder and deliberately taking his hand and placing it on her thigh. She watched Rias for any sign of anything but amusement and saw nothing, just a certain hint of desire. "Well, we have a description, and we at least know that it exists. Talking to the locals and learning about any local legends is the only way we will learn more, I think."

"There was one article that mentioned something about an offshore rock called Raijin's Mouth. Historically speaking, one of the invading Mongolian ships crashed there and was among the first to sink in the battle that drove the Mongolians off. Nevertheless, whether or not it has any connection to the actual sword, I don't know. There's a lot of legends about it, but there are several legends about a lot of places in Hakata, let alone the greater Fukuoka area." Rias' eyes suddenly sparkled, and she pulled out a travel boat brochure of all things, whipping it to the page she had marked recently. "They also are known for tonkatsu ramen, sumo wrestling, sightseeing tours, and there is even a local anime company! This is going to be so much fun!"

Ranma and Saeko laughed, and then Ranma whispered into Saeko's ear his plan for when they arrived. Saeko blinked, then thought about it for a few moments before looking over at Rias. Understanding what Ranma must've just told the other girl, Rias looked back hopefully, and Saeko sighed before nodding. "Fine. I suppose that the three of us going out on a date together will go a long way to showing whether or not the three of us can get along to make this three-way relationship that you are proposing we adopt Rias work in the first place."

A part of Saeko had wondered if Rias would take umbrage to her phrasing, her subtly pointing out that it was Rias pushing into the already established relationship between Saeko and Ranma. But she didn't. Instead, she simply smiled, nodded, and pulled out another brochure, showing Saeko where she thought they should go on their date.

They arrived in Hakata around eight o'clock local time. When they exited the train station, Rias took charge, following directions she had downloaded onto her phone to the hotel where she had booked rooms for them. "Three rooms, one with one bed for Shizuka and Rica, one for the boys, one for the girls." She winked at Ranma as she finished handing over the keycards. "Of course, if we actually stay with that arrangement, it is up in the air."

“No, it isn’t,” Ranma said deadpan, flicking her in the nose before gesturing with that same finger toward Asia, who was yawning a little. For some reason, despite sitting down most of the day, she looked quite tired, something that Ranma couldn’t really understand, considering he felt a little cramped and out of sorts after so long sitting down, full of energy. “If we changed it, we’d stick Asia with Mousse, which I ain’t alright with, or stick her in the same room as the other two lovers here. Not cool.”

Shizuka giggled at that, while Mousse and Asia both flushed at the implication before Mousse scowled. Before he could say anything, Rias grinned, hugging Ranma’s side again. “In that case, I think we have a date to get to, don’t we?”

Nodding, Ranma looked over at the others. “We’ll see you in a bit, gals and guys. Mousse, if ya could stay with Asia until we get back, I’d appreciate it.”

“Not a problem,” Mousse answered with a smile. “So long as we can order some food in?”

“Go nuts,” Rias answered with a smile, making Ranma cock his head thoughtfully. The redhead’s speech pattern sometimes became far less refined since she had left behind her responsibilities in Kuoh as the second head and heiress. “I paid for full service for every room. Jane!” With that, she grabbed Ranma and Saeko’s hands and headed back out of the hotel.

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Diodora smiled blandly as he shook hands with his family’s local factor, who was bowing and scraping before him. As he should to a member of the main branch, of course. “Thank you for the fulsome welcome, but while my main goal here in the human world is to go over your numbers here in Fukuoka, I, unfortunately, do have a few other tasks I need to see two. So if we could get to it quickly?”

“Of course, of course. I have our list of clients uploaded onto this computer here,” the man said, gesturing for Diodora to take his own space behind the desk at the small office that the man worked out of. Ostensibly, he was a real estate agent, one of many who worked in this area. What he really was was somewhat very different. “Ones we are having problems with in various manners are in orange, and contracts which we wish to get the main houses to take on are in red. Important political or monetary clients are underlined.”

“Thank you. I will be going over these for the rest of the night. Arrange for me a hotel room, please, and I will see you for a working brunch tomorrow morning,” Diodora said, already turning to his work.

The man bowed quickly, then left, and Diodora looked up for a second to look at one of his three peerage members he had brought along. One of the others was already busy at another desk, going through the human side of their business dealings here in Japan, which

spread far, far further than the Astaroth Tori did. Territories like that were meant to keep the devil business of one family from interfering with another, especially here in Asia, where the reach of the church was so small, and their chief rivals were one another or the fallen. Keeping magical contracts and so forth regulated kept run-ins between families and the third faction of the three-way cold war from happening too often.

However, that did nothing to stop devils from playing the human stock market or anything else on the human side of things with no magic involved. Moreover, Diodora had found that one of the former holy maidens, Milia Antonia, one of his Rooks, was actually quite good at numbers. His Queen, the lower-class devil, the only one of his peerage not a former holy maiden, Gea, was out patrolling the greater Fukuoka area.

The former holy woman, Natalie de La Fere, one of Diodora's bishops, trembled under his gaze, but Diodora simply said, "Get in touch with the Sitri or Gremory heiress. I will want to make a visit there."

"And..." Natalie trembled. "And what reason should I give for it? The Astaroth territory is nowhere near Kuoh, and your family doesn't have any business dealings with them, even down in hell."

Diodora almost glared, but the woman had made a good point, and he relented after a second, humming thoughtfully. "Good point. Make it so it sounds as if I wish to pick their brains about the tactics they used in the battle against Kokabiel and his legion. That battle has become common knowledge down in hell, after all, and I do not doubt that others might be thinking about doing the same. It will even cover me with my parents should they learn of our diversion."

The nun nodded quickly and turned away, already pulling out her cell phone. With that seen to, Diodora turned back to his work, thinking happy thoughts about his personal mission, as well as the upcoming mission he had from the Khaos Brigade. That mission also sounded quite pleasant to him. It wasn't every day, after all, that you were told to assassinate another heir to a pillar family.

OOOOOO

After leaving the hotel, Ranma, whose idea this had been, took over, leading Rias and Saeko away from the hotel, where Rias had booked their rooms. As they went, both girls took in the sights while Ranma just concentrated on leading them in the direction he wanted to go. Hakata was much older than Kuoh, and it showed this in its architecture. There were numerous older-looking buildings interspersed with newer-looking ones, and several large segments of the city remained open solely to foot traffic.

As they walked, the trio talked and occasionally stopped at a food stall to grab a light snack. Ranma surprised both girls by occasionally putting his arms around their shoulders as they did. At one point, he put his arms over both of their shoulders as if testing the water.

Rias simply smiled happily at these displays, always nuzzling into him whenever he did this. She also took the initiative to take his hand, kiss his cheek and so forth, not noticing at first how tense this made Ranma.

Saeko was a little more conflicted. For one thing, she still had some issues with Rias being there in the first place, although when Rias would then turn around and hug her or go to nuzzle into her neck, her feelings of jealousy disappeared replaced by confusion and some arousal. But more than that, Saeko was not all that open to public displays of affection, and she could tell that even putting his arms around them like that was a big step for Ranma.

Eventually, as she felt Ranma stiffen once just a bit too much to hide, Rias got the idea and backed off, and what little tension had been between the trio disappeared.

And all along, the conversation had been going along quite well. Saeko and Rias had long since bonded over anime, Japanese culture, and several other things (including their equally racy preferences in lingerie), while Ranma had done much the same with Rias and, of course, had the Art in common with Saeko. Now they tried to get Rias interested in Art as well, and while she was intrigued by a few of the styles, both of them could tell that he would never become as important a part of her life as it was of theirs.

Still, that was all right. Differences made the world go round, and neither Saeko nor Ranma would have been interested in someone who was exactly like one of them.

As they came near to where Ranma was directing them, though, the conversation turned to more romantic matters rather than what particular anime weapon was stupidest or which anime had the most realistic martial arts battles. "Ranma said you two actually hadn't been on all that many dates. Can I ask what kind of dates you both enjoy? I presume that sparring can count as dates for the two of you, but has there been anything else?"

Smiling at Rias' gentle teasing, Saeko answered smoothly, looking over to Ranma, who looked back at her with a smile on his face as he remembered raising her along the rooftops and then making out with her high above a construction yard. Saeko told Rias about that and some other more romantic moments, making Rias almost squeal as her eyes began to sparkle.

"Those sounds so romantic! And so much more **you** than the typical movie dinner or club-type dates." Rias cocked her head thoughtfully to one side, bringing up a finger to tap at her lips as she looked at them both. "Honestly, I don't think I can see myself enjoying club-type dates. Not unless the club was anime-themed, anyway. A dance café, maybe with a specific anime theme, would be cool, but just going to a regular club with loud music, drinks, and a lot of people dancing isn't for me. I don't think it's either of you, either."

“Nope,” Ranma said, while Saeko simply giggled behind one hand, shaking her head. “Not a bit of it. Loud noises like that would annoy the heck out of me, having so many people in my personal space would annoy the heck out of me, and frankly, I’ve never seen the point of drinking. My old man seemed to enjoy it, but like in a lot of other ways, he is a perfect example of what a person shouldn’t be like, you know? Unlike normal parents, who should be examples of what you want to be when you grow up.”

“OH, and what do you want to be when you grow up, little boy?” Saeko teased before dodging to one side as Ranma tickled her. Seeing Rias frown though as she nearly lost herself in thoughts of her own parents, she quickly added her own thoughts on dance clubs or even music halls. “While I do greatly enjoy music, I’ve never seen the point of playing it so loudly it hurts my eardrums. In addition, crowds offend me. They also strain my self-control. I am rather afraid I would react poorly if someone attempted to take advantage of the crowd for certain liberties or simply accidentally did so.”

Rias snorted at that, looking down Saeko’s body, then gestured at herself. “And I don’t think any crowd of hormonal college or high school kids could ignore the opportunity. On the other hand, stacking up bodies like that would be kind of fun.”

Saeko laughed in agreement while Ranma reflected that was another aspect of Rias that had begun to come out over the past few days. Much like how she occasionally allowed her language to slip into a much more informal style, Rias had shown instances of a bit more bloodthirsty or violent nature. It wasn’t as dark or as sadistic as Saeko’s or Akeno’s penchant for violence, but it was there. *Some of the things she wants ta do to Happy are literally devilish.*

Still, he wasn’t worried about it. More to Ranma, it seemed like she was simply trying to test the waters there to decide whether or not she did have that kind of penchant for violence after seeing true violence and death firsthand rather than already having a real desire for it.

Rias went on. “And frankly, I’ve never been in favor of fancy dates either. They’re good for... Well, getting to know you kind of relationship, but we already know one another, and restaurants are so impersonal. Again, I think an anime restaurant or something like that would be fun, but otherwise, I can take or leave the idea of going out to eat on dates.”

“You mean like something like the famous maid cafés, or... I believe there was a café in Tokyo that is rather famous for having anime-themed days, where they put up posters and the workers where cosplay outfits of specific anime for a set number of days a month or something,” Saeko said, her voice trailing off as he tried to remember the specifics.

“The second,” Rias admitted. “Maid cafés hold no interest for me for obvious reasons. But really, I think the best kind of date would be just all of us taking time off to be together. I could even cook for us if we wanted something to eat.”

Both of the others looked interested in that. Ranma could cook, but he didn't really take any enjoyment from it, while Saeko could cook and did like it quite a bit, but her repertoire wasn't all that deep. Rias could cook Japanese, Italian, Greek, American and Chinese meals, breakfast, lunch and dinner.

The two girls began to dominate the conversation at that point, talking about cooking in general, cooking shows for some reason and what type of cooking they most enjoyed.

Ranma let them to it, smiling as he listened to them talk, only to stop for a second, listening to a conversation nearby.

"And I tell you, I didn't do it! I mean, I was working there at the time, sure, but why would I try to steal like that! It's not like I'm hard up for money!" a young man was saying to another.

"Yeah, but I know what you're saying, but didn't they actually catch you in the act, dude?" the other was saying back. He then leaned forward, elbowing his fellow. "Come on, you can tell me. Was it for a dare or something? Trying to impress a girl? You know I've done a lot more stupid things for that."

The first speaker rolled his eyes, shaking his head, saying the words that had caught Ranma's attention again. "Damn it, I didn't do it. It's just another one of those Wild Horse burglaries going around."

What does that remind me of? And Wild Horse? Weird, Ranma mused, cocking his head thoughtfully to one side, worried about the seeming coincidence there. But it wouldn't come to him, and he shrugged his shoulders and continued to walk beside the two girls, listening more to the conversations around them than theirs. Several times more, he heard of burglaries going around. All of them had the same theme, the suspect was a regular person and denied any involvement when confronted, despite whatever evidence the accuser had.

In some cases, there was video evidence. In others, it was simply being seen doing the crime, although a few times that had backfired, which was when the Wild Horse thief's name came out. It seemed as if the rash of thefts had been happening around Hakata for over a month now.

But Ranma's attempts to try to figure out why that was bothering him so much ended when Saeko and Rias turned to look at him up and down. The look in their eyes made Ranma blush and stammer. All thoughts of whatever part of the rash of burglaries was bothering him left his mind as his blood began to journey south. "Wh, what?"

"You're right Rias, I think seeing him in a Cloud costume would be a fascinating idea; it certainly would show off his arms. I still maintain that putting him in a period costume would be better."

“In terms of personality, sure. But you can’t deny that it wouldn’t show off to Ranma’s physique as well,” Rias argued.

“What about the main character from Katanagatari,” Saeko shot back.

Rias stalled at that, thinking of that particular anime and the fact that the main character basically went around only wearing cloth on his arms, with very little on his chest. *Which would be very interesting, even if it covers his biceps...* “A... all right, you’ve got me there. But what would we wear in turn? I’ll grant you some of the costumes are pretty, but they’re not exactly...”

Rolling his eyes and trying simply to not think of Saeko dressed up like 2B from Neir Automata and Rias in an Erza Scarlet outfit, he coughed, then pointed ahead of them, where the pedestrian street they had been walking along ran directly into a garden. “We’re here.”

Both women turned, looking where he had pointed and gasped in delight. “The gardens! I was hoping you were thinking of bringing us here, the pictures... Wow, they really don’t do it justice at all, do they?” Rias whispered, moving closer to Ranma. And this time, when Rias put her arms around her and Saeko both, he didn’t flinch, and neither did Saeko glare at Rias.

The trio walked forward, passing from the regular streets and into the park around the gardens, entering a path through the gardens lined with violet-colored trees, so grown as to almost create a tunnel-like effect. It was gorgeous and extremely romantic, something that many couples around them had also discovered. The three of them drew some strange looks, but no one commented or glared here, most people within the gardens at this time of night being there with their significant others and thus lost in their own little worlds.

The conversation died out for a time as the three of them simply enjoyed the sights and the closeness of one another, with Rias occasionally leading up to give Ranma a kiss or leaning across him to grasp at Saeko’s other arm. They also changed how they were walking together more than once, with Saeko becoming the middle person, then Rias, or the two girls walking ahead of Ranma as he just walked on his own behind them, or with one or the other girl on his arm as the other girl turned away to look at something specific in the gardens.

As for the gardens themselves, Saeko was drawn to the wilder-looking plants, plants that had been allowed to grow in their small banks as wildly as they could within a certain area. In contrast, Rias liked the clothing on stands or paintings spread out throughout the park.

Ranma just liked being there with the two girls. He also really liked the fact that Rias showed interest in Saeko. It was a good sign that she was serious about them becoming a true triangle rather than just interested in Ranma, even if he was the most important point in that triangle, so to speak. Saeko didn’t seem as comfortable doing the same, but that was a work in progress, and so long as Rias didn’t push things too far, that was enough for Ranma.

Eventually, they stopped at a bakery. Getting into line, Ranma heard a worker being shouted at by his boss, a look of utter confusion on his face. "But boss, I just arrived here! You know I told you I'd be forty minutes late today!"

"Oh really, then who punched in with your name!? And don't give me any of that Wild Horse bullshit!" the owner bellowed back.

Once more, listening to this made something in Ranma's memory jangle for a moment, and he almost grasped it, coupled with a growing worry that this was connected to him in some way thanks to the name. But then Rias was pulling him along, making certain to capture his arm in between her breasts, licking her lips as she looked at the pastries on display.

"Come on, Ranma, these look great." She then looked up at him teasingly, her words showing that she had been aware of the talk about this rash of burglaries. "You can look for your next adventure later."

Ranma chuckled at that, and Rias bought all three of them some pastries, amused to note that Ranma had a sweet tooth even as a guy, although she and Saeko had to talk them out of leaving to turn into his female form to enjoy it. Rias was very much of the opinion that he would enjoy such treats in either form, despite his lamentations about sweets and especially chocolate just tasting different in his female form.

When they returned to the hotel, Rias thought they would end the date with a nice gentle kiss or two and was the first to initiate such. Looking over at Saeko for permission, which she got by a slight nod from the purple-haired girl, Rias leaned up to kiss Ranma. The kiss was sweet and gentle, even as Ranma's arms tightened around her, nearly making her forget he wasn't a Rook-type Devil with the strength of his grip.

However, when Saeko took her place, Rias learned that Ranma and Saeko did not really do 'gentle.' Their kisses instantly became passionate, both of them leaning heavily into one another, their arms tight around one another, with Saeko's hands on Ranma's rear, squeezing, and Ranma almost lifting Saeko up off the ground, pressing her back against the side of the hallway.

Rias watched this with a blush, then was shocked when Saeko pulled away from Ranma for a second. She leaned over, pulling Rias towards them, looking at her for a moment, conflict and desire on her face even as Ranma and Saeko pulled Rias into a three-way hug. Then Saeko was leaning forward, kissing Rias in turn.

The redhead was shocked by this action. She had thought it would be weeks at least, before Saeko got to the point of initiating things like this. Nevertheless, Saeko was not one to hesitate. If she did not find Rias attractive enough to make out with, what hope was there for more?

The redhead's shock allowed Saeko to take control of the kiss in no uncertain terms. Plunging her tongue into the redhead's mouth, their breasts pressing up against one another in a way that sent small tingles of pleasure through both of their bodies, while Ranma's arms tightened around them, one hand resting on an ass cheek of either girl as he stared, growing even more aroused from the sight of the two kissing that he had been from the kisses before, his hands squeezing involuntarily.

Then Rias was pulling back slowly, and Saeko was leaning down to kiss her neck, nibbling and biting as Rias leaned up to quickly lock lips with Ranma in turn. And while the kiss was still loving, it was also much more passionate than the gentle liplock of a few moments before.

For a time, the three of them simply switched off, kissing one after another while hands roamed, but then Ranma, as his hand tried to go under Rias' skirt, realized they were getting a little too heated for being in public. He slowly pulled away, his hands trailing up their bodies and into their hair for a moment before he gently pulled Saeko away from him and Rias away from Saeko's neck. "Hah, hah, unless we want to take this to a love hotel for a few hours, I think we need to stop here. And I definitely think that would be a step too far too quickly."

Well, for Rias and me and Saeko together anyway. Saeko and I might actually be at that point already, but if we have to slow down to include Rias, I'm fine with that, Ranma admitted. While part of Ranma really wanted to push things along, he knew that was his hormones talking. And despite how short a time he had to learn how to control them in comparison to other people, Ranma knew that letting them run wild was a bad idea.

"Yes, well," Saeko said, also out of breath a little bit, while Rias looked as if she was burning up inside a little as well as out of breath. "I definitely, I definitely think that this three-way thing might indeed work."

"Maou YES!" Rias hissed, claiming their lips one after another again before pulling back rapidly, grabbing Saeko by the hand and shaking her head. "But right now, you're right, Ranma. If we go any further, we might all lose control. Not that that would be entirely a bad thing, but it would definitely be bad timing."

Ranma chuckled hoarsely, then bid the two girls goodnight. He remained there leaning against the wall as he watched them enter the room, before shaking his head and heading towards the room he shared with Mousse, finding him and Asia watching an American movie of some kind. He sat with them for a time before deciding that Saeko and Rias had had enough time to compose themselves and sending Asia off the bed.

At that point, Mousse swooped in, grinning as he looked over at the other young man. "So, how is it, having not one but two girlfriends? You cad! I cannot imagine what Akane would say if she could see you now. All those times she called you a pervert or a two-timer, and here you are."

Ranma snorted. "It ain't two-timing if they know about one another."

"Hah! You think Akane, of all people, would care about what was actually going on?" Mousse grinned as Ranma twitched his eyes flicking around as if looking for a hammer-wielding harridan, as if she was some djinn that could be summoned by mentioning her name. "And I note you didn't say anything about you not being a pervert."

Remembering how nice the girls' rears had felt in his hand and how hard it had been to stop when they had, Ranma couldn't muster a response to that one. So instead, Ranma simply flipped Mousse the bird and turned away to get ready for bed, changing the subject as he did. "So does that mean that you finally understand I'm not interested in Shampoo?"

Heh. The current purple-haired girl in my life is certainly an upgrade from the previous model in every sense of the word, he added mentally, snickering a little internally. I'll take Saeko's worrying sadism and combat junky nature over Shampoo's possessiveness, furry-demon form, and whole Amazon 'women know better' thing any day.

Out of the corner of his eye, Ranma caught Mousse looking a little conflicted for a second, something that made Ranma turn to look at his... friend...rival... currently undetermined... more closely, but it was gone by the time he did. Mousse simply snorted, flinging his hair back over his shoulder. "As if you were ever any real competition for my darling Shampoo's heart anyway!"

Wondering what that look had been about but deciding not to push it, Ranma simply snorted, shook his head and gestured to the two beds. "Whatever helps you sleep at night, man. And speaking of sleep, I'd like to get some. You got a bed preference?"

OOOOOO

The next day, the group met up in Rika and Shizuka's room. Rias had booked them a suite, which, unlike the other two rooms, had a small kitchen attached to it. Saeko and a bubbly, widely smiling Shizuka cooked them breakfast as plans were made for the day.

"I figure if the sword you're looking for is around here, there might be some other strange and unusual phenomenon going around, right? Mysterious disappearances, weird people coming around, that kind of thing," Rika began, her tone gravelly as she gulped down her coffee as if it was the only thing keeping her alive in this wretched universe. Her hair was matted to her head, her eyes bloodshot, completely the opposite of Shizuka's happy, energetic air, which mixed a natural morning person's appearance with the smile of a woman who got laid and was thoroughly satisfied with the experience.

What that told Rias and Saeko, the only two able to discern that look from the blonde, about how that particular relationship went in the bed went unsaid as the policewoman

continued. "Odd incidents and weird local legends are always grist for the rumor mill of any police precinct. I figure I'll just hook up with some of the local police, shoot the shit with them."

"As I'm the one who is most at home with computers, I think I'll hit up the local libraries and then maybe make the round of the local temples. The libraries should have records of old, strange rumors or legends, and if there is anything magical or divine within the area, the temples will hopefully be at the center of it. And if so, I'll be able to tell," Rias said, happily munching on a scone.

Ranma shrugged his shoulders, looking over at Saeko. "Honestly, that sounds way more organized than what I was planning to do, which was just to go down to the beach and see if I could sense anything magical or weird going on. You mentioned a rock out to sea, and I figured that was a good place to start."

"That goes for me as well. Honestly, listening to you talk, it feels as if we did not really think how much brainwork would need to go into this, Rias," Saeko added, shrugging in turn.

"That actually might be a good idea. The problem from another angle, the actual area where the sword might be, rather than mythological or historical hints as to where it could be kept if it had been discovered," Rias answered, smiling faintly. "And I'm certain that the idea of hitting the beach again with Ranma had nothing to do with this?"

While Saeko simply chuckled, Ranma rolled his eyes. "Since I will be turning into my female form here to avoid any issues, no, I don't think it did."

The look in Saeko's eyes told the lie to that one. Seeing that, Rias chuckled, reminding yourself that while Saeko had gone out of her way a few times to make certain that Ranma knew she found him attractive, whatever his body, Ranma himself was still not completely at home with the idea.

"Whereas I will be going shopping!" Shizuka exclaimed happily. She made no mention of joining the investigation to discover if the sword they were after was real or not because none of them had asked her to. None of them felt Shizuka had anything to really offer in that area. "There's a lot of famous eating places around here too."

Rias and Saeko exchanged a glance, and then Rias looked over at the older blonde. "Are you one of those women who can't gain weight anywhere but in your chest?" she demanded bluntly.

Shizuka chuckled, thrusting her chest out, threatening to tear through the bathrobe that was doing a yeoman's work in trying to contain her prodigious tits. "Yep."

Even Asia joined in the jealous looks the other women at the table exchanged while Rika simply shook her head in amusement.

About an hour later, Ranma, now in his female form, Saeko, Asia and Mousse headed down to the beach.

This one wasn't nearly as nice as the one the Kuoh group had gone to with Gabrielle and the exorcists. Most of it was closed off, with signs and even fences marking out areas as private or were too near the docks where a lot of private yachts sat in the water. Asia was simply happy to play in the sand and surf with the local children. This was something she had never been able to do prior to meeting with Ranma, and she liked being around younger children a lot. Mousse was also a hit with them, allowing the kids to touch and pet him but not pick him up, watching over Asia closely.

This let Ranma and Saeko walk along the beach in different directions. Both of them had to deal with local boys trying to flirt with them but ignored them, staring out into the ocean, where a few hundred yards out past the buoys marking the edge of where swimmers were allowed, they could see large, jagged rocks in the distance. About an hour into this, one rock in particular grabbed Saeko's attention and she moved back towards Ranma, catching up with the short redhead as she leaned against an umbrella near a café, while Asia grabbed herself something to drink.

"There is a rock out there that... It seems unusual to me for some reason. I can't put it in better words, as if there is something artificial about it?" Saeko broke off, scowling a bit. "I do not know how to express it more than that."

Ranma asked her to point it out, listening idly to another conversation going around as a young woman protested her innocence at having dined and dashed at this café the day before. She looked out to the ocean looking to where Saeko pointed, and cocked his head, reaching out with her ki sense but finding that the rock was well out of her range. "We'll have to get close. From here I can't tell anything about it, although I also can't see what grabbed your attention, Sachan."

"There seems to be two Tori Gates placed there, one at the top, and one near the water line. It just seems unusual to see two of them on the same rock."

Tori Gates were the red-painted entryways that stood at the entrance to temples or on Shinto holy sites. Occasionally, they also marked out important historical events in Japan's history. In this case, those gates had been put there and remained as a reminder of the defeat of the Mongolian invasion fleet that had been defeated here in Hakata, first by the divine wind, then by the might of the defending samurai.

"... Either you've got better eyes than me, or you're seeing something I can't, because I can only see the one gate up top." Ranma and Saeko both knew that Ranma actually had far better eyesight than her, one of the many advantages of building up enough ki to start using ki healing at such a young age. But even when she described where the second gate was and what

it looked like, Ranma couldn't see it. "Okay, I think we've got our first bite then... A lot easier than I expected, if I'm honest..."

"You think this might be some kind of trap? Or a false trail?" Saeko asked, also frowning. "That would make more sense if it was someone like Rias, with her magical site, or you with your ki senses could see it. Why me?"

"Exactly. We need to investigate, but we also..."

At that point, Ranma was interrupted by a voice shouting, "Oh my God, there are two Higas!"

They turned to look and saw what looked like two identical twin boys staring at one another. One of them had his arms around a girl's waist, his other arm holding her bag. The other, dressed almost exactly the same as the first, was staring at them now, his eyes wide as he pointed between them.

The girl was also staring from one to another and had been the one to shout, her eyes wide. "I, you told me you were an only child, Higa!"

"I am!" both men said, pointing at one another. "He's some kind of imposter! Hey, don't... stop it! Stop copying me!"

"That's where I heard that kind of thing before!" Ranma muttered, clicking her fingers. "Copycat Ken!"

"Who?"

"Weird martial artist who mastered a style that could let him literally transform into other people, copying a lot of their techniques. Not all of them, thankfully, but you had to know the person really well to see through the transformation," Ranma explained. "Not a weapon user though, sorry, Sachan."

Having had that, Saeko pouted in annoyance but willingly fell in behind Ranma, who made her way forward. The trio at the center of the drama had separated, the girl quickly wrenching away from the boy with him, pointing between them and shouting, "Answer one at a time! What is my favorite food, and what nickname did your next-door neighbor call you that time when I came over unexpectedly!"

"That's a trick question. My next-door neighbor didn't notice you coming over!" the man she had been walking with said, smiling widely.

“It wasn’t my next-door neighbor, but my mother, and I’m not going to repeat that name here!” the other one said, and the woman smiled, pointing to him and shouting that he was the real one.

The one she didn’t point at shook his head with a side, then his hand flicked, and her bag blew up between them, a towel falling out of it over his head for a second. When it was pulled away, it revealed the man had somehow changed, now looking like...

“Oh dear, I’m afraid that copycat fellow’s beating is now going to be a little more severe than it would otherwise have been,” Saeko said, a faint edge of delight in her tone as she looked between Ranma’s female form and Ranma’s male form, which copycat Ken had assumed for some reason.

The next second, the beach bag smacked into the girl’s chest, causing her to fall back onto her rear as he bounced a small purse that had been inside the larger beach bag in his hand. “Oh well, Sakura, you are just a little too smart, I suppose, but also too slow! Know that you have been burgled by Ranma Saotome, the Wild Horse, the greatest thief...”

As far as copycat, Ken got before having to dodge a small fist that would’ve taken in the solar plexus, followed by a kick that sent him flying across the beach, crashing into the water. “Who ya callin’ a thief, you asshole!?” Ranma roared, charging after him.

“Quack,” Mousse said sagely, his sinuous neck bobbing in place.

“I agree. That thief had that coming,” Asia said, nodding sagely as the two of them watched Ranma and Saeko rise out into the water after Copycat Ken.

“... What just happened?” the girl mumbled from the ground as her boyfriend reached down to pick her up, and the rest of the onlookers turned to watch the chase.

Neither Asia nor Mousse noticed that back on the boardwalk where a young woman sat, staring in Asia’s direction, a phone raised up to her lips. “Diodora-sama, I have a report you will be most interested to hear...”

End Chapter

I wanted to put in a fight with Copycat Ken here but felt that, given how much better Ranma has gotten, he would be able to get in a few shots before Ken could try and copy Ranma’s moves or otherwise fight back. So that fight will happen next chapter as Rias and Mousse run into trouble of their own, Saeko goes swimming, and Rika bites off more than she can chew. Until then, folks!