

This story won the Ranma only small story poll. Sorry it's coming out so late, but even with half of the chapter done, I had to first prioritize finishing my two Patty on only gifts (new **Making Waves** chapter and **Death's Avenger living life**, a teaser chapter for an HP/WoW idea) before I could finish this. And finally, RL got in my way hugely in this last week of the month. Ironically, Christmas was the last full fic-day I was able to have. Cut the amount of work I could do per day from 7,000 to 2,000.

This is literally a swimsuit episode. The only hint of something serious comes at the beginning and the very end. If this idea bothers you... well, DxD is possibly not for you.

I had hoped to go over this chapter with Grammarly beyond having sent it off to Hiryo. Yet while he was somehow able to find the time to do so, I did not.

Edit 1/3/2021. It has also now been looked over by a new small mistake editor, Mordechai. I think that, and my own cursory Grammarly-based examination will make the reading of it much easier.

Chapter 14: DxD, Swimsuit Edition

At the same time that Ranma's various discussions were finally wrapping up, a meeting elsewhere in Kuoh was also slowly coming to an end. Not that this meant anyone involved was happy. Far from it, really.

"So let me get this straight. Not only was there a magical world full-scale battle in this town yesterday, but a dragon, an honest-to-god dragon, took part. These so-called Three Factions could use a spell, which can completely duplicate the local environment into some kind of pocket dimension. ...While I read a lot of fantasy growing up, I'm not certain my adult brain is capable of conceptualizing all of this," groaned the chief of the SAT, slumping into his chair. "Fuck me, what the hell happened to my rational, understandable, science-based world.

"You are the one who declared you wanted to be in the know," the still-unnamed government rep said remorselessly. "You can't exactly back out now." He then smiled wintrily. "Welcome to Wonderland, Alice."

Shaking his head, the chief pulled himself together, staring at Rika and Tajima. "But your weapons did work?"

"Not really," Rika demurred, while Tajima had been about to agree. "Yes, they worked up to a point. But as these supernatural folks grow in strength, their durability grows too. Three wing pairs, that's how Fallen and Angels rate their strength or whatever. Anyway, three wing

pairs or above, our bullets didn't do much. The tank rounds still had enough velocity in them to snap bone but no penetration power. And nothing we did to the big guns, Kokabiel and the dragon, did more than annoy them like so many bug bites."

Tajima frowned, not having noticed that, but admitted that he had been taken out almost at the moment Kokabiel appeared on the scene. Tajima hadn't been able to return to the fight even after getting evacuated. "Asia's healing magic was amazing, though. I mean, she literally reconnected my sliced off leg like it was nothing! If that's the kind of thing you get access to as part of the Catholic Church, I think I might want to convert."

He said it jokingly, of course. During their time with Ranma and the others after the battle, both of them had learned that Asia had been excommunicated from the church and thought that rather sad. Rika, in point of fact, had drunkenly mumbled about wanting to adopt the girl, only to nearly cry when she was informed Nodoka had beaten her to it. Rika still thought Shizuka and Asia would get along famously, though, and was determined to introduce the two of them at some point.

"The main thing I think was that tactics mattered almost as much as brute force. We can use our brains to kind of offset the power advantage of the supernatural, well up to a point anyway." Rika warned, "Gabriel, Níðhöggr, Kokabiel and the woman who arrived near the end of the battle, they're so far beyond us we couldn't touch them."

Tajima nodded. "I asked them if bringing more weapons to the party would have allowed us to do more, and the newcomer, she's some high ranked Devil related to one of the local girls. She laughed and told me that she had once, on a dare, buzzed an F-16 and been hit by a Sidewinder, only to come through it completely unscathed bar her clothing."

Serafall had mentioned that she had probably given that young airman one hell of a strange day. "He sees a flying Magical Girl who attacks him and then blows off her clothing with his mighty missile."

But the gist of the story had not been nearly as funny to Rika. "Maybe something like a nuke could do something to someone at that level, but I don't see that becoming a viable option anytime soon."

Her listeners all shivered at that idea. Being the only nation to be nuked by an enemy nation had left quite many scars when it came to such weapons in the Japanese's collective psyche, even though they were one of the first countries to embrace nuclear power.

The government official shook it off first, seemingly determined to change the subject. "Right, fine. Will want your full After Action Reports to go over. Do you think that Ranma will be willing to write up a formal report to go with the one you'll be preparing?"

Both SAT team members winced at that. Neither liked writing up reports. In fact, very few people, even in the SAT, did. And after a moment, Rika shook her head. "Probably not. He might be willing to come in to give a verbal report, but Ranma strikes me as the kind of guy who would be more willing to run away than to actually deal with paperwork."

"They're right," Kenji interjected at this point. As by far the lowest-ranked person in the room, he had been silent, knowing he was there more as a source of knowledge on Ranma and the general martial arts community than to give his opinion unless he was specifically asked for it. Now, however, he spoke up. "The police in Nerima occasionally attempted to get him or any of the other martial artists to write up reports about their battles, to try and help with local insurance, you know? While Ranma was willing to help repair the damages caused, none of them were ever willing to write up reports. And all of them had various ways of making that very clear to everyone involved. Mostly in humiliating ways."

While the government official frowned at him, the chief of the SAT nodded his head slowly. "In your opinion, would Ranma make a good leader? Of a team say, that we can put together to handle this kind of supernatural stuff?"

""**NO!**"" Rika, Tajima and Kenji shouted as one. After a moment of wide-eyed amusement, the two men looked at Rika, bowing their heads politely to her, and she continued first. "The kid's amazing physically," she said bluntly. "Fast, powerful, strong, skilled. All that. He's got a great tactical head on his shoulders. But a leader? Maybe a sergeant or other noncom. But not one who needs to think long-term, to know about laws, regulations, or what to do in the aftermath of the fight. If you want my opinion, I would have him be, as I said, the combat leader of a team, but have someone else around to do the long-term thinking, the paperwork and choose the targets and Rules of Engagement. Someone who can make that last bit stick too. That'll be the harder part, I bet."

"And if you are thinking along that line, I have another suggestion," she went on.

"What's your suggestion?"

"Better weapons. Better armor," Tajima interjected. "We need both."

"Yeah, those too. But my suggestion is, do not be afraid to ask for help from the supernatural community itself. After talking to the Devils, Akeno, Sona, Rias and the others, they're all pretty understanding, easy-going types. Maybe ask them for advice, or even recruit a few of them. The super-naturals usually police themselves apparently and are already willing to work together with different factions to take on criminal types or terrorists like Kokabiel."

Scowling, the government official slowly nodded. "We will take that under advisement. Thank you. I expect to see your formal reports in two days. Now go get some sleep."

As the two SAT members filed out, their chief turned to the government representative. "You're going to poach them, aren't you?"

"They are the only trained police people we have, tactical or street, who have now survived a battle on that scale with the supernatural world. Yes, I'm going to poach them!" the older man barked. "I might even follow up on their suggestion. I'll have to turn that decision over to my superiors."

Although from what he had been hearing, he was pretty certain the whole 'Anti-Magic-Team' thing was a done deal. All that was left was to decide how to fund and staff it. *And what, by the flames of Amaterasu, their mission will be.*

OOOOOOO

The next day, Rias and her peerage woke up to a new world. Sort of. They had gone back home for the night, all of them spending the night in Rias' rather than their separate rooms. Now, as they were slowly waking up and preparing breakfast, Rias was staring at the dish she was preparing, her body on autopilot, as her mind spun its wheels going nowhere.

"You're still uncertain if we should live here?" Akeno guessed, coming up beside Rias, helping to put the finishing touches on breakfast.

"Somewhat. I have a lot of fun memories in this house since we've moved in. But the fact that my parents bought it for me is kind of ruining it for me," Rias admitted. "What do you think? Your mind was messed up just as much as mine was."

Akeno nodded her head at that. "I believe that any such moves are premature. We should wait for the summer at the very least before making any such long-term plans. Unlike their attempt to get back at you by removing you as their representative here in Kuoh, this house is fully paid off and in your name, so there's nothing they can do about it. And we make more than enough money to pay for the utilities ourselves."

"True." Rias made a moue in thought. *And regardless of anything else, we have to stay here in Kuoh until I'm strong enough to handle Gasper's magical power. No way am I leaving any of my peerage behind, regardless of my wish to travel around the world. Although that just means we'll be exploring Japan alone for a time. And before that, we have something fun planned today!*

Decision made, Rias turned to shout out the door of the kitchen. "Come on, people! Get a move on. We have a swimsuit competition to get to!"

OOOOOOO

That morning, Ranma was unsurprised to have woken up to a call from the police requesting he come in and talk to them. And, unsurprisingly, the government official, who still hadn't given Ranma his name, was there. Ranma was beginning to be annoyed by the lack of a name but decided to ignore it for now.

When he was questioned about it, Ranma gave them more detail about the fighting, his opinion about the enemies' levels that had been faced, the reasoning and so forth behind the battle, which Rika and Tajima hadn't really understood very well.

Ranma very pointedly did not explain his own powers, only saying that he had been able to fight Kokabiel to a standstill because Kokabiel was unused to his aerial style and because of his magical weapons. It was true, after all. Even if it wasn't the magical weapons, the police assumed.

Near the end of the meeting, the still-unnamed government representative mentioned the same thing he had told the SAT chief the night before. That the government was thinking of putting together a team to deal with supernatural issues.

Ranma agreed with the idea in principle. "So long as they aren't dicks, or assume I care much about rules and whatever I'd be willing to join. But not for a while. I was thinking of taking Saeko and looking for some of the legendary swords and such that are out there. She's growing faster than even I could've expected, but Saeko still lacks the stopping power she needs. And frankly, while their magics are amazing, both of the weapons I have access to are kind of poor for close-quarters combat."

"But you would be willing to become part of the group like that? We are uncertain exactly what the makeup of it will be, but you, Rika, Tajima, Saeko, and perhaps a few members of the magical clans with which the government has worked on supernatural issues before, the Shinra and Himejima clans, will be involved."

"You might want to wait on that," Ranma answered after a moment's thought. "Tsubaki and Akeno, two of the more important local devil girls, are both from those clans, and if you're also thinking of reaching out to the local Devils, you'll need to make certain that reaching out to their families isn't going to cause trouble. I know Tsubaki's pissed off with her family about the whole marriage agreement thing they set up between her and me and that she was kind of estranged from them even before that."

He held up a hand when the government official made to speak. "And no, I'm not in favor of it either. She's got a boyfriend. I've got Saeko." *And Rias and maybe even Akeno are interested in me already, as disturbing as that is. That's enough for any man!* "In fact, if you want to get on everyone's good side, you can look into annulling any marriage agreements Genma made for me via government decree or something. Beyond that, I'd be interested to see what those clans know about the mystic side of things. But I for sure don't want to turn around and find that I'm also engaged to Akeno or something like that." *That would just be weird.*

“Is that actually likely to happen?” The government official was incredulous.

“You haven’t read his permanent file, have you?” Kenji chuckled dryly. “The fact that his father set up all of these agreements with other families for Ranma’s hand is in there somewhere, I’m sure of it.”

“Probably under the heading of long-term trouble,” Ranma added helpfully. “For now, though, I have a little competition I need to get to.”

“Oh, what kind?” Kenji inquired, suddenly wary.

“It’s not the kind ya would be interested in or one that will result in property damage, don’t worry. At least not from anything involved with me in the next few days. No, this is entirely something else. I don’t think you would believe me if I told you really, not even you, Kenji,” Ranma chuckled, a blush forming on his face before he made his excuses and exited via the nearest window.

The government official stared after him, shaking his head. “He does know there’s a perfectly useable door right there, right?”

“Oh, he knows. He just doesn’t care,” Kenji chuckled wryly. “Doors, after all, are for normal people.”

OOOOOO

At home, Ranma found Saeko and Asia ready to go, with Gabriel and her two hangers-on (Ranma still wasn’t certain he liked either exorcist) also ready, having headed out earlier to buy swimsuits for themselves. With them was Mousse, who was currently in duck form, sitting in Asia’s lap. Beside the healer, Koneko sat leaning against the wall, who informed him that the rest of the devils would meet them at the beach. They wanted to get there early to throw up the spellwork to hide their presence from the locals. “What about you, mom, Kasumi?”

Kasumi smiled prettily, looking up from where she had been talking quietly with Gabriel. The two of them were determined to keep in touch once Gabriel returned to the Vatican, and Irina had reminded Gabriel of the cellphone the Vatican had given her when they left Rome. “I will be joining you. It sounds like a lot of fun to watch, though I will not be taking part in any of the contests.”

“What about you, mom?”

Nodoka chuckled, watching as the others stood up from where they had been sitting on the floor. The sitting room of their house still lacked in furniture, but it had actually worked in their favor the night before, allowing for more futons for their various guests. “No, no. You young folks, go have your fun. I wouldn’t want to rain on your parade like that.”

At that, Nodoka's eyes twinkled with what Ranma thought of as the Grandbabies Possibility Detected™ twinkle, glancing at Saeko and the other beauties who would be going to the beach to show off for her son along with still more girls they would meet there. Or at least, that's the way Nodoka thought of it. *I am uncertain about Gabriel. She seems a little too... otherworldly, perhaps? To be interested in such down to earth matters, but in the others, even that Serafall girl, I detect an urge to show off.* "And do try to keep the smiles on the ladies' faces, my son."

Shivering, Ranma had almost literally pushed Kasumi and the others out of the house to join Saeko, then led them all over the rooftops. "Let's get out of here before she breaks out the fans."

"Fans? Are these fans some kind of weapon? Why would Nodoka-san attack us?" Gabriel cocked her head to the side in question.

"Ah, they aren't a weapon, just a sign of, well, let us just say she has a kind of mental instability that comes out at times," Ranma explained.

The looks of confusion did not go away, and eventually, Ranma decided to explain the whole grandchild craving his mother had. Gabriel didn't see a problem with it since humans were supposed to procreate. Thus a desire for seeing a new generation was a good thing. Xenovia agreed it was strange given Ranma's age, and Irina couldn't stop giggling at the idea of Nodoka dancing around with her fans with Asia.

"Hey little sister, you're just lucky she's not after you for having kids. I'd wager that it's only a matter of time," Ranma grumbled, which shut Asia up, and Gabriel instantly shifted her stance, agreeing that Asia was far too young to think of such matters. Irina was now lost in a fantasy of having a little one of her own, and Koneko was... she was blushing and pouting, looking down at her chest in such a way that Ranma really didn't want to know what she was thinking.

Xenovia was once more looking thoughtful, but she hadn't responded to anything anyone else had been saying since they had boarded the bus, not looking at Ranma or anyone else, so Ranma left the swordswoman to her thoughts. Of the two, it seemed Xenovia had the least ability to set aside the revelations she and Irina had been told to have fun in the now. But Ranma figured she would either get into it once the competition started or not. Whatever the case, it was Xenovia's problem to get through on her own.

The Kuoh area was about thirty minutes train ride away from the nearest beach, and in the afternoon, it was there where all of the disparate parties that were going to be taking part in the day's events gathered. With Koneko leading the way, Ranma, the church trio, and the other humans were led away from the rest of the crowded beach area, into a zone where the Devils had thrown up spells to keep anyone from noticing this segment of the beach any longer.

This included a small changing section, outside of which the other boys, Kiba, Saji and Issei, were already waiting.

Mousse flew over to them, and Ranma mock-glared at Issei. "I don't suppose I need to worry about you having drilled any peeping holes or anything in the guy's side, right?"

"Gah! Why the heck would I bother with that? It would be stupid to... oh, you're going to change, right?" Issei shivered. "No way, dude! I'd be interested in seeing the oppai afterward. But seeing you while you're changing from one form to another still freaks me out, so I wouldn't even think of peeping on you while changing. Well that, and I'd have to time it precisely right or gouge out my own eyes for the horror I could see."

Ranma smirked at that and then entered, changing into his female form and pulling on a simple blue swimsuit, the kind worn at high schools Japan-wide, simple and utilitarian. Instead of having the name of a school, the white patch across the chest read 'Boy' in big letters.

Outside, Kiba frowned at Ranma. "Are you intending to take part in the swimsuit contests?"

"Not really. But this is the ocean, and the ocean means cold water. So I figured I'd just jump ahead of the wave, heh," Ranma said, adding a bit of a giggle and a bounce, causing Issei and Saji to shudder and look away. "Kind of like duck-boy over there."

"Why am I here again? I still don't understand why I'm involved in this..." mumbled Sona, as she was pushed out of the changing area by her sister. Her outfit was surprisingly daring, although perhaps not by choice, given the flushed color of her face. It consisted of two triangles that cupped her breasts and an even smaller triangle below, done in pastel colors of blue-green and pink dots coming to a bowtie as she trembled next to Tsubaki. The Sitri heiress' Queen wore a similar bathing suit colored black. It had more coverage, and the front portion of her bikini bottom was shaped into a vague V with two strings going up to her waist and back down rather than around at the hips.

"Because I wanted to see my little Sona-tan in a swimsuit, and you're as lovely as I expected!" Serafall shouted from inside. "And I was right, you're so cute I just want to eat you, Sona-tan! Muu, That's it I want..."

"Gahhh!" Sona nearly shrieked as she raced away from the changing area, quickly putting Tsubaki and the boys between her and the changing room. She then narrowed her eyes at the two boys. "Say anything perverted, and I will explode the water in your eyeballs."

Sona, Saji, Issei and Tsubaki were here without the rest of Sona's peerage, and if Sona had any say in it, she wouldn't be here at all. But Sona and Tsubaki had literally been dragged here by her sister, who had not taken 'no' for an answer. *As usual*, Sona grumbled to herself as

Saji and Issei turned away, though not before Issei mumbled something in English for some reason, a phrase she'd never heard before. *What the heck does cushion for the pushin' mean?*

Next out came Asia, Kasumi and Koneko, followed by Irina and Xenovia, although the latter two were looking behind them worriedly, probably for the still-changing Gabriel. The two exorcists had bought swimsuits that were identical in cut but not in color. They were one-piece swimsuits, but the sides cut out, and one diamond portion over the belly button removed. Irina's was orange with strips of white along the cutouts, while Xenovia's was blue with white stripes.

Kasumi wore a simple white swimsuit but had a much longer sharp V-neck, which went down to below her bellybutton. It wasn't obscene, though, given the amount of coverage up top and down below her navel.

Asia wore a very frilly two-piece yellow and white swimsuit, a bottom piece that looked like a short skirt connected to a bikini bottom, while above it covered her chest entirely as well as her shoulders and upper back. In contrast, Koneko wore the exact same style of swimsuit that Ranma did.

"You look nice, Asia. Did Kasumi pick that out with you?"

"Yes!" Asia chirped happily as she walked beside Kasumi, who smiled at her, putting an arm around Asia's shoulders.

Seeing Ranma, Koneko smiled her tiny smile, her cat ears and tail appeared, the tail pushing out of a small hole at the bottom of the back. She held up a hand, intoning "Simple Swimsuit Alliance."

"Heh, sure," Ranma replied, high-fiving the girl, though once more her Nekomata features were almost enough to cause Ranma to back away in fear.

Koneko saw this, and as Ranma lowered her hand from the high five, grabbed at it, holding Ranma's hand tightly. "Remember, Sempai, Project Acclimatize."

Ranma chuckled wanly at that. "Heh, right, right. I, um, I'll remember that." Then she blinked as Koneko pulled out a small phone and started to record a video on it. "What's that for?"

"Rias wanted it to show Gasper your face and form in both bodies, Asia and the others. It's a way to get to know you all."

"Gasper... that's the vampire with the isolation issue, right?" Ranma muttered. That name had been mentioned like once in front of her, so she couldn't remember the details.

“Un.” Koneko panned the phone around on Kasumi and Asia, then turned it off. “That will do. Too much stimulation for the Hikikomori will be counter-productive.”

“No Saeko, or Akeno and Rias?”

“Nope. Too much stimulation,” Koneko repeated.

“Wh...whuuuu...” Ranma muttered, staring wide-eyed as the last group of girls came out, shaking her head and looking away quickly, trying to tamp down her blush.

If you didn't know her real personality, the fact that in terms of size and actual territory covered by Saeko's swimsuit was the most daring could have surprised you. Ranma had anticipated something daring, knowing how Saeko really was. But her anticipation had not actually prepared Ranma for what she was seeing.

Saeko wasn't as big up top as the majority of the supernatural girls. Indeed, she was the same size as Irina, putting her right in the middle of the pack. But while her bikini wasn't quite a string bikini, it was tiny up top, consisting of two triangle cups that covered a few fingers worth of her breasts, letting an amount of boob be seen. The bottom was the same, covering everything that needed to be covered, but little else, both her rear and much of her hips were on display. Both top and bottom had the same coloration of black and red splotches, almost like a weird kind of camouflage color.

Next to her, and possibly remonstrating with the human girl about how much she was showing, was Gabriel. Not that Saeko seemed to be listening. She was instead staring back at Ranma, her spine straightening, her breasts shifting subtly, as she saw the impact she'd had on Ranma and enjoyed it.

Gabriel's swimsuit was white on white with frills up top like Asia, while below was a simple white bikini covering the totality of her rear but leaving the rest of her legs and strong, toned stomach, a stomach that showed a good sixpack much like Saeko's, to be seen. And while the cut was simple, on Gabriel's body, it looked positively angelic, both innocent and alluring thanks to how good Gabriel's body was underneath, coupled with the truly otherworldly gold color of her hair, which almost seemed to create the image of a halo in the those who saw her. Around her waist Gabriel wore a sarong in orange, giving the ensemble a splash of color.

“I still don't know what was wrong with my original swimsuit,” Serafall muttered from behind Gabriel.

“Because it was indecent!” Gabriel huffed. “I know you are a Devil, Serafall, but you should have some sense of propriety.”

“Besides, we don’t know what these contests are going to be about,” Rias’ voice came from behind them, though she had yet to appear. “You might want a more sporty style, for fear of bouncing out.”

Still pouting, Serafall moved out behind the taller Gabriel, smirking and bouncing in place as she waved at the boys and boy-turned girl. “Hey, guys! What do you think of Magical Levia-tan, adult swim style?”

Serafall’s swimsuit was actually a simple bikini but with a ton of cleavage showing, the bikini basically only covering half her breasts in from the side, including her nipples. It had frills on the top half of the bikini and a very, very small bottom, much like Saeko’s. Yet despite the bottom half, the whole thing somehow came off as innocently sexy thanks to its coloration of polka dots on the bottom and stripes up above.

“No hamming it up for the judges before the events even begin,” Rias scowled, moving to one side of the others with Akeno following, making a ‘fufufu’ sound behind one hand as her eyes raked over the boys.

Akeno’s swimsuit was, oddly to Ranma’s mind, actually bigger than Saeko’s, but then again, so was the area it had to cover. Her suit was a lighter reflective red shifting to black on the bottom piece with two strings going up and around her waist, then back down to the back of the suit, clinging to her rear like a second skin. Above that, the bikini’s top was designed to show an incredible amount of cleavage while still covering the majority of her chest, going around like a bra rather than over the shoulders. The top, too, clung to Akeno like a second skin, supporting her chest and thrusting it out even more than normal.

Like a few of the others, Rias had also gone for something simple but really impactful. Like Gabriel’s, it was white and covered everything with far less cleavage than Akeno on show. But unlike Gabriel, her suit had gold links connecting the front to the back, while more links replaced the bikini strings going up over the shoulders. Around her waist, Rias also wore a sarong, but hers matched her hair color.

In short, every girl that had come out of the changing area was a great beauty with a wide variety of styles on display. And as the last girls came out of the changing area to join the rest, Kiba, oddly, found himself in sync with Saji, Issei and even Mousse. Mousse was still in duck form, but he joined the others in, staring at the girls as they walked out. “We are in the promised land, boys,” Issei practically moaned. “So many different kinds of oppai...”

“Don’t just concentrate on their breasts. Take in the entire package!” Saji exclaimed, his eyes racking up and down first Sona’s form, then the others in succession, showing no preference for form, although he did seem to spend an inordinate amount of time looking at their hips.

“Quack,” Mousse replied. “Quack, quack.”

“You do know that none of us understand you when you’re in that form, right?” Kiba stated, not taking his eyes away from Tsubaki until surprisingly, he found his eyes straying sideways to Xenovia, who had also been forced into a bikini thanks to Irina and Gabriel.

All three of them wore simple bikinis, one-piece swimsuits that would not have looked out of place at a school swim competition. But given the bodies that they contained, that hardly mattered. Even Gabriel, who was wearing a simple white swimsuit picked out for her by Kasumi, was a vision of beauty come down from Heaven. Which was quite on-point, considering the circumstances.

“Mousse says that the only thing better would be to have Shampoo here. But I have to disagree with you. There’s more than enough pretty girls here as if you’re just talking about the view, and you know Shampoo would make everything into martial arts competition. Which I got the impression was not what most wanted here. It might be more fun for me, but not for everyone else,” Ranma mumbled.

Ranma too had been staring at the girls, specifically Saeko, Gabriel, Akeno, and Rias. But she had gotten control of her eyes far faster than the others, turning away quickly to stare out into the ocean. Yet the fact there was still a blush visible around her ears gave away the impact the sight had on Ranma.

“Oh look, he, or currently she is learning,” Saeko teased, moving past her with a lingering kiss on the cheek. Saeko swayed her hips slightly and soon felt Ranma staring after her, causing her to smile triumphantly, sending a low-key glare at Rias. She had not forgotten how the other girl kissed Ranma’s cheek the other night but wasn’t willing to challenge her on it. *I do owe her my life, after all.*

Ranma shook her head to force her eyes away from Saeko’s swaying hips, then resolutely looked over to the others. *Come on, Ranma, you’ve got to get control of this! No perving on any of the girls, not even Saeko, not in public.* “So, what exactly are these competitions going to be?”

“Well, first, there’s going to be three different challenges. In each contest, everyone involved will be able to earn zero to twelve points. Beyond that, Serafall decided yesterday that the boys should be in charge of choosing two of the challenges,” Rias giggled, inwardly fist-pumping at the reaction she’d gotten from Ranma. “It was the only way we knew that none of us would pick something that would save her, one of us or the other.”

The reason behind giving the boys the choice of the first two competitions was simple: Serafall refused to let any of the other girls choose a competition that would give one of them an advantage over the others, like a singing competition, for instance. There was a reason why Gabriel was the Herald of Heaven, after all. That, and Serafall, who really, really wanted to just have fun and not think about anything important for a bit, felt the boys would come up with some nifty ideas. And she had not been disappointed.

“Kiba and Saji have chosen one competition. Issei-kun chose a second, and then the third will be a simple magically assessed popularity contest,” Serafall said with a twinkle and a twirl, frowning a little as the boy turned girl turned away once more rather than look at her. *Oh, heck no! Every male eye should be on me, and you are no exception! I will have my blushing and my nosebleeds, Ranma!*

“Magically assisted?” Kasumi questioned. “What do you mean magically assisted?”

“You’ll see. It’s a nifty little application of magic that my Sona-tan... and Rias, I suppose...came up with.”

“I suppose? It was my idea!” Rias mock-pouted before turning back to Ranma and Kasumi, smirking slightly at the way Ranma’s eyes went up and down her body once before the other redhead could turn away.

“You both are welcome to join us, you know. In fact, Ranma, I think you might have a lot of fun.” When Ranma demurred, Rias caught her arm in both of hers, squishing it into her voluminous chest, tugging her along after the others towards where Kiba was standing at the edge of the water. “Come on! Don’t knock it till you try it.”

Shaking her head, Ranma was still about to pull away, but then Saeko grabbed her other arm. “Indeed, Ranma. You can’t just come to the beach and just sit and watch the rest of us compete. That wouldn’t be fun at all.”

Ranma looked at the purple-haired girl in surprise. “You’re competing too?”

“Of course. Someone has to stick up for normal human girls in this kind of competition. After all, we’re the ones that invented swimsuits,” she teased Rias.

Rias rolled her eyes at that, but Ranma nodded seriously. “When you put it like that, I think I do want to compete.”

“Why am I not surprised?” Rias murmured before taking her place alongside the others, as Kiba had directed, all of them staring out into the sea.

“All right, this first competition is a swimming and flying competition. First of all, you must swim out to the marker that my assistant is placing out there at the moment.” Kiba pointed, and Saji waved as he let go of a small buoy with a flag. It was tied to an anchor that he had dropped earlier while the girls were changing.

“After you pass that point, you must fly back if you are able, then strike a combat pose. Points will be given for speed obviously, how quickly you can transform from swimming to flying and how elegant you are doing it and style in terms of your combat pose. Magic is allowed so long as it isn’t used to interfere or block your opponents.”

Hearing this, Ranma grumbled, then suddenly smirked, elbowing Saeko in the side. *It ain't like I actually want to win this after all.* "Heh, just like Devils, I suppose, they need to stack the deck to win against us, right?"

Saeko giggled, a fire going through her once more as she saw Ranma looking at her. No matter how hard Ranma tried not to look below her neckline, Ranma's eyes still had flicked down, and her face still showed more than a hint of a blush even as Ranma turned away.

Meanwhile, Akeno had flinched slightly at flying in front of others but shook it off. After all, devils could hover and even fly without using their wings via their magic. *I won't be nearly as fast as the others, though. Pity, but I can still hope to win one of the other contests. I doubt I have any chance of winning the whole thing.*

The girls, and one boy-turned-girl, lined up across the sands facing out into the ocean. The only ones not taking part were Asia, Koneko and Kasumi. Ranma looked at Koneko, and the white-haired girl shrugged. "I don't like water."

"Huh, well, that's not so surprising. But what do you think about sandcastles?" Ranma asked mock-seriously. "Asia's never built one."

"A travesty," Koneko gasped, blinking rapidly before grabbing Asia's hand and leading her off to the edge of the area covered by the Devil's spells.

Kiba and Issei stood on either end of the line, making certain no one had taken a step forward yet, then Saji held up his hands, shouting, "Ready, go!"

Ranma was off instantly, leaping through the air so quickly and so fast that most of the others were left behind. Gabriel was just as fast off the mark, even if she was still confused about the purpose of all this. A second after her, Serafall took to the water like her namesake would have, swimming powerfully. Soon the three of them were racing forward before the others had barely taken a few strokes.

Rias growled as she saw this between breaststrokes and shouted, "Don't underestimate me!" Letting out a word every time her head broke water. With that, she began to use her Power of Destruction. Not in terms of its magical attack, just the aura around her hands and feet, which was enough to cause steam. Which, when she directed it behind her, acted like a steam vent, shooting her forward.

Sona also used her magic to good effect. Her control over the water was such that Sona could create a minor current that pushed up behind her. *If I am being forced to take part in this, I am going to try and win! Although, I notice Serafall-neesama hasn't started to use her magic yet.*

In this way, Akeno, Tsubaki, Irina and Xenovia were left in the dust, as was Saeko, although she was philosophical about this, while the others were extremely annoyed, with Akeno murmuring ideas about how to use some of her magic to aid her but coming up with nothing. But Saeko knew the instant that Kiba had mentioned flying that neither she nor Ranma would be doing very well here. *Ranma might do well enough in terms of the swimming, but I doubt she will be able to do anything on the lap back.*

With a final ki-assisted burst of speed, Ranma hit the turning point a bare fingernail's length ahead of Serafall and Gabriel. There the unnatural (Jusenkyo was pretty unnatural in Ranma's opinion) redhead leaped up into the air out of the water like a porpoise. Landing lightly on the buoy with the marking flag on it, Ranma kicked off it and into the air, soaring over several others who had yet to meet the halfway mark. However, despite her Aerial Style, Saeko was correct: Ranma couldn't fly like the others and was soon left in the proverbial dust once the supernatural girls got out of the water.

On the other hand, Gabriel had trouble with that aspect. When she caused them to appear, her wings became soaked. Serafall too floundered for a second, before dropping down to the shallow bottom of the water here, and then kicking up out of it so hard and fast, she too split the water, more than far enough to give Serafall room to open her wings.

Coming in behind the leaders, Sona simply lifted herself out of the water, thrusting upwards by another current of water like a spout to do the same thing her sister had, whereas Rias timed it perfectly. She switched to flying by leaping and diving out of the water like a dolphin would, and then mid-leap, summoned up her wings. A single flap was all Rias could do before coming back down, but it was enough to lift her body just out of the water. Then she skimmed above the water, making a wide turn around the buoy rather than a sharp one, alas before coming back the other way. But the time she lost making that turn Rias made up in the flight back, passing by Ranma.

Gabriel landed and summoned up her sword, standing there with her wings outstretched and her sword poised behind her head with both hands raised on the hilt. "Uh, um... er, oh, shoot! Here I be, to herald...victory?" The Herald of Heaven stumbled over her words, not used to giving dramatic speeches she had to make up on her own instead of relaying through her.

Serafall, who had come in first, did much better in the imagination department than Gabriel, who beat Serafall by a bare few seconds. Flying in with her devil wings outstretched, she twirled in midair while creating little dots of magical color all around her. A second later, she landed, poised with one hand thrust up, her magical girl's wand in hand as she thrust the other hand forward. "Magical Sparkly Pretty Levia-tan Ocean Attack!"

Darn it, best make it a good impression then, Rias thought wickedly. With that, she summoned her magical aura all around her. The next instant, she landed in a crouch, her hands

out to either side of her filled with the Power of Destruction before she brought them together slowly. "...By the power you and I possess, Dragon Slave!!!"

Coming in behind her friend Sona beat Rias' effort at the combat pose part of the competition, despite coming in a few seconds after her big-breasted friend. She landed like a surfer, standing sideways on to the ocean, shouting out, "Fear my power, Water Dragon!" A portion of the ocean rose at Sona's command behind her, creating a funnel area around her that looked quite like a dragon.

Of the humans, Ranma was the only one to really try a landing. She leaped out of the air, and with a wink to the waiting Rias, shouted out, "Here comes Ultraman!" as she landed, one hand in front of another, as blue light appeared around them. "Ultra-Beam!"

The others didn't even bother trying, following the example of Akeno, who simply landed near Ranma, shaking her head. "I'm not even going to bother trying," she intoned, her voice tart.

"Don't be like that," Ranma chuckled, pushing her shoulder playfully. The redhead was grinning and had already admitted to Saeko and Rias they were right. This was a lot more fun than just lazing about on the beach, even with Kasumi, Asia, Koneko and his mother to keep him company. "I bet with that lightning you use, you could pull off some cool effects like Sona did with the water. Maybe something from Sailor Moon or act the part of one of those evil villains from Power Rangers or one of the other Kamen Rider series."

"He's so right! You not only have the figure for it, Akeno but your black hair that the Kamen Rider shows like to see in their villains and lightning? You could have become the Sado-Queen, emissary of the Dark Empire or something," Rias giggled, hopping in place excitedly. This day was turning out to be a lot of fun, a perfect day after the emotional and physical rollercoaster Rias had been going through for a while.

Mousse flapped over to them and suddenly was holding a large board with writing on it. "Why did you not use your wings? You are a devil, ergo you have them, but you did not use them and were noticeably slower than the others."

Akeno paled slightly but tried to cover it up, a hand raising to her mouth and making a 'fufufu' chuckle, though the sound was noticeably forced. "Ara, with everything I am already showing you in this bikini you still want to see more? How bold."

Mousse flapped his wings and backed away rapidly, but Ranma too was looking at the black-haired girl, forgoing his questioning of Mousse's seeming master of Sign-fu. "Actually, that's true. You're the only Devil who..."

"I'm afraid my friend here doesn't really like how her wings look, lack of exercise, you understand," Rias interjected to Akeno's relief.

“That is silly,” Mousse signed. “If you have wings, they are a part of you. You should exercise them, just like I do in this form. Trust me, muscles do **NOT** carry over!” he flipped the sign several times in that sentence, once entirely just for the ‘NOT.’ “You would not believe how sore I was even after only a single flight of an hour’s length. Now, I can imitate a goose for how long I can fly.”

“Yeah, I agree with Mousse.” Ranma gestured down to herself, then over to Mousse, who nodded emphatic agreement as Ranma went on. “When I first got this form, I thought it was just a burden, just something I had to get rid of as fast as possible. But after a little bit, while I still hated it, I could see the many uses I could put it to. Heh, and I’m not talking about just using it to mooch off food. Girls aren’t as physically strong as guys, so I trained to change my style to have better speed in that form. Mousse did the same to take advantage of his small size and ability to fly. You devils need to be able to fight just as well in the air as you can on the ground.”

“That is because your forms have positives,” Akeno growled, becoming somewhat angry at this whole conversation. She knew that neither cursed man, after seeing them fighting the Fallen she couldn’t think of them as boys, had any hint or clue about her heritage, or how it affected her wings: the Half-Devil, Half-Fallen mismatched pair of wings that were the sight of Akeno’s greatest shame, and the cause of much of the agony of her life. But their united front on this seemingly random point somehow annoyed her beyond all reason, like someone accidentally touching a sore scar. “My wings do not have any upside.”

It was only now that Ranma became aware of how tense and angry Akeno was. “Er, Sorry, I guess...” she replied, backing off slightly.

Mousse did not, and pulled out a black marker, began to speak as rapidly as he could turn his sign around, although watching, Rias was becoming a little confused as to how the sides of the sign were cleaning themselves as Mousse went along. “And you think that being a duck is easy? You have any idea how many times I’ve almost been cooked or turned into a pet? And do not get me started on how the Amazons back home see me! I am a strong male anyway, something that caused a lot of problems, and then to be cursed to have a weak form like that, it was the worst of two worlds!”

At that, Akeno’s anger slowly faded, but she still was not willing to back down on this point. “I... suffice it to say there is a reason why I do not wish to show my wings. A reason I do not know either of you well enough to explain. Perhaps in the future, but not right now.”

“That’s fine,” Ranma hastened to interject. “This ain’t the time for a serious conversation anyway. Just remember, if ya do, Mousse and I, we got no idea about your Faction nonsense, so whatever your baggage on it, we probably won’t care about.”

At that, Akeno brightened, understanding the truth of those words. “True enough. Thank you, Ranma-san, Duck-san.”

“Oy, why am I Duck-san, when you use his name?” Mousse grumbled via his signs, at which point Ranma began to question him closely about his newfound skill.

At that point, all of them turned their attention to the three boys as Saji raised his hand above his head politely. “May I have your attention, please. We have finished tallying the scores, and unfortunately, many of you did not score very well. If you could, please look at my perverted friend?”

“Hey man, don’t throw me under the bus like that!” Issei hissed before gesturing to a portable whiteboard behind him, looking more serious than Ranma had seen him bar the battle yesterday. “Okay, so how this tournament works is kind of complicated, so we should go over it now. Each contest is its own separately pointed competition, with only the top three scorers taking points for each competition. The scores can go from twelve points for first place, six for second and three for third place. Each individual match is scored similarly, with the max being twelve points and so forth.”

Kiba took over then, moving to the whiteboard’s other side. “In our first match, we wanted to see three things here, but we were not scoring them all equally. Swimming, after all, is only peripherally associated with how good someone looks in a bathing suit. So the visual impact of your landing was half your total score, with the other half split up between swimming and flight. We also wanted to see how smoothly you could transition between sea and sky.”

Watching this, Rias sweatdropped, as did Akeno. “Did you think Kiba-kun would take it this seriously?”

Rias shook her head, staring at her knight somewhere between bemused and shocked. Tsubaki, too was looking at her boyfriend in wonder, wondering where the heck this had come from.

“While Tsubaki, Akeno-san and Saeko tried their best, I am afraid their overall speed in relation to the others made their last-place standing obvious. They receive no points, just like Ranma and Saeko.”

All those named nodded, and Kiba went on. “We have in the lead tied for twelve points each, Gremory-sama and Sitri-sama. You lost points for coming in third and fourth place, respectfully in terms of speed. However, you made up for that in the use of magic during the race, and the combat poses afterward. Those were magnificent, almost choreographed, and thus made you place first, and will therefore gain the first place points to take into the next round.”

“What!?! While I’m not going to argue with the fact that Sona-tan was amazing, and even Rias was okay, surely I should’ve tied with them!” Serafall growled, pouting outrageously at the trio of boys.

This instantly had an impact on Issei and Saji, whose minds instantly began to shut down, but Kiba was made of sterner stuff. He took the marker from Issei and pointed at Serafall. "While you earned a solid eight points, enough to put you in third place, you didn't use magic in the initial aspect of the race, not even during your turn. And your turn wasn't as good as it could have been. Furthermore, while you came in faster, beating out Gabriel, Sona and Rias the next to land, you lost several points because frankly, the whole magical girl shtick just seemed a little too practiced for you. Whereas Sona-san was quite clearly out of her comfort bubble, and Rias had come up with her bit on the fly, using her extensive knowledge of anime."

"What exactly does this have to do with swimsuits, anyway?" Xenovia grumbled, annoyed on Gabriel's behalf for losing out to not one but three Devils in this first competition.

For her part, Serafall pouted outrageously some more but acceded the points Kiba had laid out.

"Just roll with it," Saeko chortled, pushing the other swordswoman's shoulder playfully. She then turned to the judges, seeing that they had written put up the other points. She obviously, had scored a measly three, simply because as a human, she hadn't been able to fly and hadn't attempted to pose, being far too tired to do so.

But through a severe amount of effort, Saeko had still beaten the other two humans, Irina and Xenovia, back. Her overall score had tied her with Tsubaki, who also hadn't even tried to do a combat pose.

Even better, she had seen Ranma's nearly drowning herself when she noticed Saeko going the other way. Saeko had lost her top going too fast and had been forced to grab it out of the water, but the sight of her bare breasts through the water, despite several yards between them, had been enough to cause Ranma to lose the stroke and to nearly gag on seawater.

That was a major bonus in her view, even if it had nothing to do with the contest. "So, what's up next?"

"One-Shot Volleyball," Issei and Saji shouted as one, with the more senior Sacred Gear user going on. "The rules are simple. We'll put up a net, you all will split into teams. The first team to score a point wins that round, everyone on the winning team gets 12 points, the loser six. The two teams then split up to play versus themselves. After that first round, every loss takes three points away until finally, only two people remain. The last one standing gets a full twelve points added to the points they've already earned, the second-place six and again the third place three."

"I'm playing this round too," Koneko announced suddenly, appearing in among the other competitors, a small but fierce fist raised in the air, while behind her, Asia continued to make their large sandcastle into a, if somewhat childish, work of art. "Sounds like fun."

“In that case, I vote we have Ranma and Saeko be the two captains,” Issei spoke up quickly, seeing a way to watch Ranma get humiliated. “I think that way we know that it won’t just be peerage vs. peerage with some hangers-on.”

Saeko was about to bow out, because unlike Ranma, who still had something of the arrogant martial artist about him (currently her,) Saeko knew where she stood in the power structure. Heck, she didn’t even have a connection to a foreign source of magic like Ranma. But then she saw the little smirk on Rias’ face and the smile on Ranma’s face. One was challenging, the other encouraging. With that, Saeko couldn’t turn away. “I agree, but if I take part, one of the boys is going to have to join in to even the two teams.”

Shrugging, Kiba volunteered for that. “I’ll serve on Saeko’s team since Ranma can move as fast as I can and perform the Knight portion of the battle.”

“In that case, I get to choose first.” With that, Ranma looked around, thinking, while Rias smiled at the short redhead, and Akeno bounced in place a bit, sending her breasts to jiggle just slightly in their bikini prisons. *Yeah, nope.* “Koneko.”

“Heck yes,” Koneko replied in her normal deadpan tone despite the words themselves sounding like she was excited, exchanging a fist bump with the Sunshine Boy-turned-girl. “Let’s do this.”

Saeko thought about it for a moment, then chose “Xenovia.”

“Irina,” Ranma instantly replied, followed by Saeko taking Serafall, who sent a challenging glare to the other powerhouse, which was answered by a dazzling, if somewhat toothsome, smile. Seeing no other choice, Ranma instantly chose Gabriel, with Irina explaining the game’s rules to the Archangel even as sparks began to fly between Gabriel and Serafall’s eyes.

Soon the teams were chosen. Ranma had attempted to keep Rias and Akeno off her team but had ended up with both Queens, while Sona and Rias both wound up on Saeko’s team, with Akeno being chosen second to last and Rias being last. The glares Rias shot Saeko for this made her smirk, while Ranma simply looked away, whistling innocently at the soulful pout Rias was sending her way.

The Game began, and instantly, Ranma realized why the boys had chosen volleyball because it wasn’t only the ball that was bouncing. Ranma, who had won the coin toss, served the ball up to Akeno, and if anyone had asked the cursed currently-girl if this was somehow a way to make up for not choosing her quicker, Ranma would have denied it.

In any event, Akeno leaped up, using her magic to hover in the air for a moment as she smashed the ball down overhand with both hands, causing her chest to bounce as she fell back to the sand. Ranma was still staring when Xenovia smacked the ball back up off the sand in a

tremendous dive, Akeno's shot having been to her right and too far away for anyone else to get to.

Rias bounced it up from that point, her chest bouncing almost as much as Akeno's had as she did. The next second, Serafall smashed it back down, barely skirting the net, her chest bouncing, although not as much given the nature of her swimsuit and the smaller size of her chest. Nonetheless, Ranma was barely able to blink her eyes away as the shot flashed right towards Tsubaki, who shrieked and barely got her hands up in time. "EEEEP!"

The ball went practically sideways, but Ranma fielded it, bouncing it up and into the air, shouting out, "Koneko, serve it up!"

"Right!" Koneko smacked the ball upward, but the momentum of the shot Ranma had sent her way nearly knocked the Rook on her rear.

Gabriel fielded it, but she neglected to hold back her strength, and the ball exploded, the explosion tossing her teammates every which way. "Oops."

"Point, Team Saeko!" Issei shouted, licking up the drool which had been dripping from his mouth while staunching the flow of blood from his nose. *So...much... bouncing.*

"Wait, what!?" Ranma shouted, joined by everyone on her team.

"Gabriel destroyed the ball. That's a penalty," Issei began, but then Saji, who wasn't in much better shape, started to whisper in his ear. The two of them whispered back and forth for a time, then Issei began, somewhat reluctantly. He had hoped to humiliate Ranma a bit faster than this. "So, after consulting with my fellow judge, we will let Gabriel-sama off with a warning. But the next person to destroy the ball will lose their team the game."

Saji added sententiously, "This is a game of teamwork and finesse, not just raw power, after all."

The deadpan looks he got from this should have won awards.

The match continued from there, with Saeko serving this time. She sent it immediately up and over Serafall's head, setting her up for the perfect spike, which she delivered.

Ranma was still staring at Saeko, absentmindedly noticing that the boys had gone back to drooling when the ball zoomed towards her area. Thinking that Ranma wasn't going to get it, Irina dove toward the ball at the same time Ranma did. The two crashed together but somehow sent the ball upwards, where Koneko fielded it expertly.

"Ugh, what the heck Irina," Ranma grumbled, then blushed as she realized that Irina had wound up on top of her, the exorcist's chest pressing into Ranma's face.

“Eep!” Irina jumped up backway quickly. “Oh, forgive me, Father, I’ve let another... well...” Irina stumbled to a halt, trying to puzzle out if being touched like that by Ranma when he was a girl counted, before looking over at Issei.

He didn’t seem to object to it, though. Or at least, Issei didn’t seem to object to Irina being touched by a girl. “Gah, damn it, why did it have to be Ranma to get the oppai to the face! Why couldn’t it be one of the **real** girls! Now I don’t know if I should be ecstatic or jealous!”

Saji nodded seriously beside him, while Mousse didn’t seem to have any trouble. The stimulation up to this point had proved too much for him, and he was now passed out on one wing, half his normally white-feathered body in carmine.

The ball was sent over the net by Gabriel, where it was fielded by Serafall, who bounced it towards Kiba, who fielded it expertly before Sona sent it over the net. Too slow, as Irina and Ranma had both gotten back to their positions, and Ranma fielded it once more. Koneko smashed it back hard, and Rias barely blocked it, her Rooks super-powered shot knocking her off her feet. But Serafall still fielded it, sending it right towards Gabriel, who batted it up and away.

Or that was the plan anyway. Instead, the ball exploded once more, to the groan of everyone on Ranma’s team, bar Ranma, who was still trying to tear her eyes away from the girls on the other team once more. “Darn it,” Gabriel blushed in embarrassment. “This sports thing is harder than I expected...”

“O, okay,” Saji announced, his eyes wide unseeing at the moment. *I, I have seen the light. By the Devils that came before me, I have seen the light!* “Twice is too much, so I think we can all conclude that it is Team Ranma’s loss. So, um, split up randomly into teams, three versus three, three winners versus three of Ranma’s team.”

The next matches weren’t over nearly as quickly for the most part, and Ranma quickly got herself under control or seemed to anyway. She fought ferociously, hammering the ball every time she could, and eventually helping to put Serafall’s team out of the count with the help of Koneko and Irina, overcoming Sona, Serafall, and Xenovia, exploiting Xenovia’s unwillingness to help with the others. In contrast, Saeko fought valiantly, but Gabriel had seemingly gotten the hang of controlling herself, and her team ran right over Saeko, Rias and Kiba.

This evened everything up, and the matches continued, getting smaller, the matches becoming faster and more violent. Both in the fact that magic began to be used by many and because of the sheer violence shown.

And the girls continued to bounce throughout. Issei soon was kneeling beside the group of matches he was watching, his hands clasped together as if he was praying to the oppai shrine

in his room. Saji was openly weeping, knowing he would never again see as magnificent and varied a sight as this.

Beside him, Kiba, who had not made it past the second round of three-team matches, had his eyes locked with laser-like accuracy on Tsubaki, although he couldn't quite deny the attraction he was starting to feel towards Xenovia, even if her swimsuit was quite staid in comparison to the others. Indeed, that merely added to her beauty in Kiba's eyes.

But to the surprise of many, Ranma had simply...shut down almost after the first match, where she had simply stared instead of broken down like the boys. She continued to fight valiantly until she ran up against Gabriel, who overwhelmed her easily. Something that should have made Ranma angry or eager to try again. Instead, Ranma had just retreated into the ocean. There, it seemed as if she wasn't reacting at all to the sights laid out in front of her. At least at first.

Indeed, Rias, Saeko, Akeno, Serafall and even Koneko, in her own quiet way, had wanted to make the aqua-transsexual at least bleed from his nose like Issei and Saji and were somewhat disappointed. Indeed, even though Serafall had little interest in the human boy/girl as a love interest, Serafall was becoming more than a little annoyed by Ranma's lack of reaction. And Saeko was frowning, having noticed that Ranma hadn't even seemed bothered by losing twice in a row and thus eliminated before they had gotten down to one-on-one matches.

Then Rias noticed something that caused her to giggle and stare, costing her team, just her and Akeno, the match. This left Serafall and Koneko facing off against one another, which could only have one outcome.

Not that Rias cared at that point. She was too busy staring at the steam slowly coming up from where Ranma was standing into the ocean's shore. And the way Ranma's eyes hadn't moved from herself or Saeko for the last five minutes.

Ranma was a master of manipulating his/her body's energies. The heat caused by arousal, her blood stirring faster and faster, was no different. The heat still had to go somewhere, though.

"Okay, folks! After a vicious series of magical volleyball matches, the winner is Serafall. Because of her performance in this round and in the last, she is now in the lead by one point. Lady Gabriel, who didn't bring in any points in the first competition, took second place in this round due to winning every volleyball match bar the first team contest. This puts her in third place. Second place is Rias, with Sona a distant fourth."

"Tsk. None of us humans are even going to get a platform finish," Saeko sighed.

"However, if you have been falling behind, don't despair. At this point, you are going to enter the last and overriding competition. The popularity contest!"

Having come in from 'swimming,' Ranma narrowed her eyes at Kiba, one eyebrow rising and looking over to Mousse, who deliberately turned his duck head away so that Ranma couldn't look into his eyes. "Why does this sound familiar to me?"

Saeko looked at him quizzically but then turned her attention back to Kiba, who had somehow been elected the master of ceremonies. "The rules of this game are simple. Serafall has come up with a spell that will allow us to track an individual's popularity by the number of glances sent their way, stares and so forth. One point will be awarded for glances, three for stares, five for drooling, or as my assistants have recently shown, causing blood loss. If you are hit on, flirted with, or even whistled at, that is ten points."

Raising one arm to get Kiba's attention, Ranma objected, "Wait a minute, that doesn't make sense. There aren't that many of us, and besides you and me, the other three boys here are equal opportunity lechers."

"That is why this contest is going to happen out in the rest of the beach." Indeed, the rest of the beach beyond the Devil's spellwork was pretty crowded. Lots of people lounging around, swimming, and other stuff.

"I hate to say it, or rather I don't hate to say it as I find this whole thing ridiculous," Xenovia grumbled, "But how will we know if the magical spell is working accurately. What if Maou Leviathan just doesn't put the spell on right on a few of you? She is a Devil, after all."

"A Devil who wants to beat Gabriel fair and square so that no one can dispute the fact that I am the most popular one between us," Serafall shot back. "Moreover, you'll be able to check," she giggled, then pointing at Sona's Queen. "At this point in the explanation, I would like to have Tsubaki volunteer from my host audience."

Tsubaki stepped forward, and Serafall pointed a finger at her. Slowly a nearly invisible screen of some kind appeared above her head, displaying a set of numbers before it shrank into a band that went around one arm. "You will go out in teams of three, moving through different areas of the beach, then switching to the next, before coming back here."

"I'm out," Ranma announced, holding up her hand. "I'm totally uninterested in knowing how many glances or stares I get, thanks. This part just doesn't seem fun to me."

"Really, I think it might be amusing to at least watch how people react to Gabriel and Serafall differently. I'll go along with it so long as I'm paired with one of them," Saeko intoned, wondering both what kind of person they would attract and who would have the resolve to approach either of them in the first place. There was no denying the two were almost otherworldly in terms of their beauty.

"I think I'll bow out has well," Rias cut in, surprising Akeno and the others. "I'm not interested in getting more public acclaim after being set on a pedestal at Kuoh."

At that, a thoughtful Akeno declared she would take part. It would be interesting to see how well she could do against Serafall and Gabriel, and she didn't have a problem with her popularity. Irina also bowed out, saying she would much rather work on her tan, which was quite literally nonexistent at the moment. Behind Gabriel and Akeno, Irina was easily the palest of them all. She moved over to lay out next to Koneko and Asia, who were sleeping on either side of their giant castle, both girls looking satisfied, if for different reasons. That let Xenovia with the job of joining Gabriel.

"If we are leaving the magical area, I think I will join you and head to get some food for us all," Kasumi said, standing up from where she had been watching everything from a lounge chair.

Ranma looked over to Mousse, leaned down to them, asking, "Holy, sinful or wholesome, which do you think is going to win? I'm betting Kasumi. Why don't you all cast that spell on her too? I'm curious."

Mousse quacked back, but Rias frowned at him. She and a few of the Devils had found they were now able to follow the duck's speech as if it was just another human language, translated via their Devil heritage. "Kasumi isn't even in the contest, and no offense to Kasumi-chan, she's good-looking, but she isn't drop-dead gorgeous like Gabriel and Serafall."

"That's why I said wholesome. Kasumi's the kind of girl you want to take home to your parents, you know what I'm saying, the kind of girl many a man could see themselves settling down with. Gabriel carries with her this innocent, aloof air, which tells everyone they can look but don't even dream of touching. Serafall..." Ranma frowned. "Not sure how to explain that one."

Mousse flicked out a sign, on which was written, "Like Issei said when she first came out of the changing room, the oppai loli is real!"

Ranma stared at the sign, then back to Mousse. "Don't let him influence you, dude. One Issei is more than enough, and he and Saji are a little too alike already." Shaking her head, Ranma turned back to Rias. "Anyway, the two of them just won't garner as much interest simply because every guy who looks at them will automatically assume they're out of his league. They'll get a few pretentious assholes, but Kasumi? the last time we went to the beach with her, she won a popularity contest without even having entered."

OOOOOO

The contestants were soon off, leaving Irina laid out next to where Kasumi had been, Asia and Koneko happily building what looked like a dueling cathedral and fortress, and Ranma and Rias.

Ranma stretched, then turned towards the changing area. "I think I'm going to head out too. Kasumi will probably find a lot of watermelon and beachy kind of foods, but I don't think that'll be enough for all of us. I think a round of yakitori skewers will be better."

"I'll come with you." Setting her amusement at Ranma's thoughts on the final contest aside, Rias got to her feet and moved over to where her sandals and a sarong lay, pulling it around her waist, then grabbing up a pair of sunglasses. She waited there until Ranma returned from heading into the changing area to change back into a guy and the two of them and then headed towards the back of the beach through the Boardwalk area out into the town beyond.

As they walked, Rias leaned against Ranma, smiling up at him. "Thank you. I don't think I got the chance to say that. Thank you for helping me deal with Riser. Thank you for being there when I had to confront my parents. It means a lot that I had you and Akeno there as support. And thank you for standing with my peerage and me against Kokabiel when you didn't have to. That bastard came for Sona and me. There was no reason you or any of the humans had to fight him."

"That's what friends are for," Ranma tried to downplay his part in that. "Fighting Riser, I volunteered for that because I wanted to. As for being there with you when you slapped your parents with a dos' o' reality, well, I had to be there, to cancel the spell from the Gekkaja that was keeping Riser from healing."

"Maybe, but you did do that for me. And I have to thank you for that." Without warning, and after scrunching up her courage, Rias turned slightly so that she was now hugging Ranma's side. Ranma blinked at her, and then Rias was leaning up, kissing him.

Her lips were softer and a tad bit fuller than Saeko's, surprising Ranma somewhat. *Are girls' lips supposed to be so different from one another?* The errant thought flittered across Ranma's suddenly stunned brain. And then there was the feel of Rias' chest against Ranma's, also a bit bigger and far softer than Saeko's, pressing up against Ranma's chest.

Such was his surprise at this sudden move from Rias that Ranma's instincts had him responding, pressing his lips back against Rias' for a second before he could control himself. Then he tried to pull back, panic filling him, but Rias clung to his arm like an octopus, deepening the kiss. *Gah, it's the same problem I had with Shampoo. Where the heck do you push at a girl to get them to let you go without being a pervert?*

The kiss went on, with Ranma now totally on the backfoot, unwilling to respond, but unwilling to use his greater strength to pull away from Rias for fear of hurting her, and losing the willpower to do so as the milliseconds sped past, taking all his brain's higher functions with it. What wasn't being sandblasted away by Rias' kiss was being fully engaged in fighting Ranma's male instincts, which were screaming at him to *kiss her back, you fool!*

Eventually, with her arms still around Ranma, Rias leaned back, smiling happily up at him, her heart in her eyes as she resumed speaking as if the heated kiss hadn't occurred, or rather, had simply been part of her statement given physical form. "I think I'm falling for you, Ranma, in a bad way."

Ranma stammered. He'd sort of been fearing this for a while, and he knew Saeko had too, judging from the conversation they'd had before the battle with Kokabiel. *But then again, Saeko was awfully silent about the kiss on the cheek last night, wasn't she? Though that doesn't change what I have to say at this point.* "Rias, that, er I'm with Saeko!"

To this, Rias simply nodded. "You are, and that's fine." Rias let him go then but moved to walk beside him again, clasping Ranma's hand in one of her own as she got the two of them moving again. "I just wanted to make my pursuit of you official." She then smirked up at him, her face and smile stilly happy yet also sly. "Note that I said my pursuit of you, not that I aim to replace Saeko-chan in your affections. Saeko-chan might think of it as competition, but I'm willing to share, to a certain extent anyway, and so long as I know the relationship is based on affection instead of power or ownership. Harems are normal among Devils, after all."

I would've preferred to be someone's one and only, but I'm not going to be a homewrecker to do it, Rias reaffirmed to herself, practically giddy. *But I felt that moment of push back by Ranma. I've seen how you look at me. I saw the steam. I know you're attracted to me and that we're friends. That's enough to build on, for sure!*

Before Ranma could reply, Rias lost control of herself for a second. She swooped back up for another kiss. And this time, to her delight, Ranma couldn't stop his body's automatic response. Instead, he leaned in, his arms going around her, as he kissed her back just as fervently. Rias instantly deepened it, her tongue flicking into Ranma's mouth to battle with his own.

Eventually, Rias pulled back, winking at him, her voice a low murmur. "Well, now, it seems as if I'm not the only one interested in this relationship, now is it?"

With that, Rias turned, swishing her hips as she continued their walk through the town, and leaving Ranma behind utterly poleaxed, the incredulous target of many a glare from nearly every man or boy around him. Finally, he simply shook his head, following after her. *Why the hell is my love life so freaking complicated whatever I try to do! I know I've thought this before, but if there is some malignant spirit or God out there that is fucking up with my life...if this is vengeance for something that was done to you or one o' your shrines, see Genma, not me. If you doing this for fun, realize that if I find out who you are, we'll be having my kind of fun. Which will involve a lot of breaking things and screams on your part!*

After a few seconds of imagining the carnage he would unleash on whatever trickster god was playing with his life, Ranma hurried to catch up to Rias. After all, she was the one with money. The two of them stayed silent, glancing at one another occasionally, one looking

confused and worried, the other amused and happy. After everything that had happened with her family, this whole day had been a delight, with Ranma's reaction to her come-on being the icing on the cake.

They soon found a restaurant stall which sold in bulk and bought several boxes worth of chicken and beef skewers. "That should be enough with whatever more traditional fare Kasumi and the others will find."

As they were walking away, Ranma's sixth sense started to act up. He looked around slightly without breaking stride and frowned when he noticed a young man with black hair watching him through the crowd. Not Rias, not both of them at once, just Ranma. *Huh, wonder what that's about.* Deciding to find out, Ranma scanned the area for an excuse and spotted a nearby ice cream store. "Hey, I'm gonna grab some ice-cream. Why don't you head back to the others while the food is still hot? I'll meet you there."

Nodding complacently and evidently not having noticed anything untoward, Rias glanced to the side then gestured them both into an alleyway between two of the buildings. There she turned and leaned up suddenly, surprising Ranma once more with a kiss. She pulled back, smiled brightly, and said, "I'll see you back at the beach Ranma. And remember, I don't want to steal you away from Saeko. I just want to join you."

With that, Rias stood back, summoned her wings and flew up into the air, using a spell to hide her body from detection.

Ranma watched Rias fly off, shaking his head, shocked anew at how open the Devil girl was with her affections. *And how the heck is she such a good kisser? I know she hasn't kissed anyone before. And books for sure didn't help me all that much with Saeko!*

That thought didn't stay in his head for very long. Instead, Ranma wondered what the heck would happen when Saeko found out that Rias had kissed him again, this time on the lips. Or that Ranma had kissed back. Ranma had an almost inhuman level of body control, but you would have to be literally inhuman to not kiss a girl like Rias back, and Ranma did find her attractive. He'd found her attractive for a while, but Ranma would never have acted on it thanks to his relationship with Saeko and admittedly not understanding how to do so.

Shaking his head, Ranma moved towards the ice cream shop at the far end of the street. But instead of entering, he looked at the young man who was watching Ranma from across the street, leaning lackadaisically on a wall. Without Rias around or a crowd between them, Ranma took in more of the man than before. He was taller than Ranma, slightly broader in the shoulders, dressed in something Ranma identified as looking kind of like Chinese finery mixed with a school uniform, with black hair, black eyes and a slight smirk. And just looking at the guy, Ranma could tell he was strong. The way he stood, the muscles hidden under his clothing, a certain sense from his sixth sense telling him that something about this guy was beyond normal.

And then there's the other one, Ranma thought, seeing a flash of blond hair from a nearby rooftop. Ranma had spotted that one as Rias left and wondered idly how she had hidden from the redhead Devil once Rias was in midair. *Regardless, it's time to discover why these two are interested in me.*

As Ranma was thinking that, the other young man nodded affably to him, gesturing Ranma to come closer. But Ranma rolled his eyes and then leaped upwards, landing on the rooftop of the ice cream shop from a standing start. The man chuckled followed Ranma easily, informing him that his guess had been right. Ranma found a blonde girl waiting, backing away and moving to join the other young man, circling around where Ranma had landed.

The blonde was a cheerful sort, with long blonde hair almost like Asia's, light blue or green eyes, Ranma couldn't tell. She wore a schoolgirl's outfit with a long skirt, but over it wore dark orange-colored armor, with a sword in a sheathe at her side. Even as she circled Ranma to join her companion, she smiled cheerfully at the martial artist, making him think of Irina for some reason.

Ranma crossed his arms, his eyes narrowed, showing no concern about the woman or the fact she was armed. "Yo. What do you two want?"

"Greetings, fellow warrior of humanity," the man said with a chuckle for Ranma's attitude. "I have heard of your strength, and I wish to speak to you about how..."

"Is this supposed to be some kind of sales pitch?" Ranma guessed coldly.

"The start of one, at any rate. Can I ask that you hear me out?" The man smiled, seemingly unconcerned about Ranma's aggressive attitude.

"Sure," Ranma shrugged with a sudden smirk on his face, his whole attitude seeming to change on a dime with an abruptness that made the girl's eyes widen. "Although ya probably shouldn't expect much. I ain't interested in working for anyone but myself most of the time."

"My name is Cao Cao. I am the descendent of the original..."

Ranma interrupted the man again, using his knowledge of how to piss people off to control the other man. Cao Cao seemed proud of his heritage so, Ranma attacked him on it. *And whatever else can be said about my grades in school, I always liked history.* "Ugh, you're a descendant of that ambitious angsty cock-bag who got his ass kicked at the battle of Red Cliffs? My deepest sympathies, man."

That seemed to work instantly as Cao Cao was suddenly holding a spear, not taken from ki space. Ranma would have been able to sense it. No, this thing just appeared as if pulled from somewhere else entirely. And it was magical, so magical in fact Ranma's hackles rose, and he

could feel the connection between himself and the spirits of Jusenkyo roil, almost but not quite reacting as they had when faced with Kokabiel. "How dare you!?"

"Easy, Mon Cherie," the girl spoke heavily accented Japanese, the French accent coming through clear enough to give Ranma flashbacks to a certain French Frog Face. "If you attack everyone who disdains your ancestor, we will never get anything else done, n'es pa?"

She smiled cheerily at Ranma, bowing floridly from the waist. "My name is Jeanne. I am a descendant of Joan of Arc. Do you have anything to say about my ancestor?"

"Nope. Got a lot of respect for people who see what has to be done and do it without letting other people's opinions stop them. I have a problem with a French family named the Chardins, but that's about it."

Jeanne cocked her head to one side at that, making an inquisitive noise before shaking it off, gesturing Cao Cao to speak. "Regardless of your unique take on history, I am indeed Cao Cao, and I wield the True Longinus Sacred Gear, the spear which slew the child of God, Jesus Christ. I am the leader of the Hero Faction of the Khaos Brigade. Perhaps you've heard of us."

Ranma frowned for a moment, then shook his head. "Nope, I haven't."

That seems to make the other man a little off-balance once more, and he frowned. "Truly? I would have thought your Devil owners would have told you about us after the incident yesterday. Well, regardless. The Khaos Brigade is a group of... call us outsiders of the mystical society that has existed between India's Gods, the Faith of the church and Hell. Each faction within the Brigade has its own agenda, but we are loosely aligned in that we disdain the present order of the mystical side of the world. The current order that puts Gods, Devils and Angels above humanity on this, humanity's world."

"Humanity's world? What you think that the rest are aliens or something?" Ranma scoffed. *Although, come to think of it, where did the first gods and such come from?*

"They are not human that is enough," Cao Cao replied sharply.

Ranma rolled his eyes. "That just makes you sound like a racist. What next? Are ya going to force the Chinese back into work gangs? Use 'em for target practice? Or worse, experiments?"

"Wait, what??" Cao Cao questioned now even further off-balance. Then he shook his head. "No, it is a simple fact. Devils, Angels, God's will have one thing in common."

"They can use magic?" Ranma interrupted, smirking slightly as he continued to push the other guy while Jeanne had taken a step back and seemed to be biting her lip to keep from

laughing. It was evident to Ranma that Cao Cao took himself quite seriously and wasn't used to being made fun of.

"No!" Cao Cao growled. "They all look down on humanity. Magic is a part of why they do so, but it is their attitudes that disturb me. They lie, they manipulate, they use magic to prey upon us and hide among humanity. What do you think would happen if humanity knew that such interlopers lived among us?"

"Argue, screech, try to deny it, try to fight them, try to understand them, try to make a deal with them, keep them hidden and attempt to police them," Ranma counted off what he would assume people would try actually using his fingers to do so. "Believe even more in the God of the church, try to make deals with the devil, try to scientifically figure out what they were..." He smirked at Cao Cao's glare and shrugged his shoulders, while Jeanne was now clutching her side, practically doubled over in laughter. "Sorry, dude, those are all the things I can see humanity do if they learned the truth."

"We would throw off of the power of the supernatural and take it for our own!" Cao Cao shot back even more sharply before suddenly smirking slyly, gesturing upwards. "The Devil you were just with, she manipulates you too, you know. That kiss she gave you. Do you honestly think that she has any actual affection? A creature born of darkness? Sex is just another means of manipulation."

At that, Ranma's eyes narrowed. "All right, you've got a point somewhere. Get to it before you annoy me."

Cao Cao smirked, happy to have put Ranma on the back foot himself. "As I said, I am the leader of the Hero Faction. We represent the best of humanity, past, present and future, the strength of humanity! Join us and help us overcome all the other powers out there. You will face enemies, battles, excitement beyond anything you could ever imagine, and you would be fighting the good fight as well. What more could you ask for?"

"I don't know, I think I could ask for a lot more," Ranma drawled. "Of course, what you and I think of as strength are probably two different things."

"I don't think so. I am an expert in gauging the strength of those around me, and I can already see you would be a fine addition. Indeed, you could perhaps become the second strongest non-Sacred Gear user among us. Of course, that means nothing in terms of the strength of the Sacred Gear users among us but..."

Ranma took a single forward step before jumping forward almost too fast for Cao Cao and Jeanne to track. His blow towards Cao Cao's face was blocked by the spear's shaft, but the impetus of the blow caused Cao Cao to take a half-step back, swiftly bringing the butt of his spear up towards Ranma's leg. Ranma blocked this with his foot, using it as a springboard to

hop upward, kicking out hard at Cao Cao's face, but this too was blocked, which in turn Ranma used to flip himself up and backward.

There he shook his head, dodging into a stab from Jeanne, grabbing her arm and shoulder throwing her so fast Jeanne was still blinking as she landed, rolling on the rooftop before hopping to her feet, her sword flashing out so fast that had Ranma tried to follow up, he would have been sliced. Ranma hadn't, though, and was now glaring at the two of them.

"I gave my blood, sweat, and tears to be as good as I have, to say nothing of having any kind of normal life. I didn't receive a fucking handout at birth. There's no ancient warlord or heroine ancestor or whatever lending me their strength thanks to some kind of cosmic fucking lottery. And if you think I'd ever be satisfied by being only strong in comparison to other non-Sacred Gear fighters, you really don't know me nearly as well as you might think."

"For another thing, despite the crap you're trying to peddle, I don't see any conviction about it in your eyes. You're just high on your own power," Ranma growled, his voice turning deadly serious, as his hands flopped to either side. For Ranma, this was the equivalent of getting ready to launch into battle, as his smirk rightly showed. "For another, all your so-called strength relies on that damn Sacred Gear of yours. Take it away, you're nothing."

"The Sacred Gear is part of my very soul, part of my heritage. Of course I am going to use it. No one can take it away from me. Now you just sound jealous," Cao Cao taunted, thrusting the spearhead towards Ranma. "Is this what you want, more power? Then you should be even more interested in joining us unless you like to live off scraps from the Devils like a good little dog."

"No one can take it?" Ranma mused, "Let's find out." With that, Ranma took a step off the roof, grabbing at the edge of it as he pulled the Quite Thief Technique around himself.

Jeanne raced forwards, frowning as she looked down. "My, he is a fast little rabbit, is he not?"

She turned rapidly as Cao Cao gasped, seeing Ranma appearing right in front of the other young man, grabbing at the spear, a kick aimed at Cao Cao's chest.

Though surprised completely, Cao Cao was able to get a knee up to block the kick, but that didn't deaden any of the strength from the kick itself. And Ranma's grip on his spear was such that Cao Cao's own hold was overcome. Ranma was now holding the spear sneering at Cao Cao, who glared at him.

Ranma was about to put the spear in his ki space, wondering if doing so would block the soul-connection between the True Longinus and Cao Cao. Honestly, he thought not, but it was worth a shot. But before he could, the weapon started to disappear, and Ranma was forced to duck as a sword went through where his head had been a second ago. "That ain't nice, Blondy!"

“Apologies, but I always feel it is appropriate to attack those who have proven my enemy, non?” Jeanne quipped, pressing Ranma hard, as Cao Cao, holding his spear once more, also slashed in. Both were holding back their strength, not wanting the nearby Devils or the Archangel to become aware of their presence, but they weren’t holding back their speed and were surprised Ranma could keep up with them. They had learned he had fought Kokabiel but hadn’t discovered Ranma had done so independently, believing that he had simply survived the battle instead of having been one of the better fighters who took part in it.

Ranma twirled around Jeanne’s attack, launching a kick, which was blocked by the sword but used it to take to the air, where Cao Cao tried to skewer him, frowning as he realized instantly that Ranma was just as at home in the air as he was on the ground. Ranma danced between them, using their own attacks to stay in the air, his hands seemingly immune to the cutting edge of Jeanne’s sword and very careful to stay away from the edge of the True Longinus. “We need to get him back on the ground!”

“I am open for suggestions on how to do so, Cao-chanNNN!” as she was finishing speaking, Jeanne found herself reeling away from a near miss, but Ranma had missed on purpose and used a stab from Cao Cao to push himself up and over Jeanne’s head. Fingers flashed for her eyes, then to her shoulder, deadening the limb and a sudden stamp landed on the pommel of her sword, launching it down out of her nerveless grip into the top of the roof, where it sunk almost hilt first.

Before Cao Cao could intervene, Ranma had Jeanne in a chokehold as he glared at Cao Cao. “I ain’t buying what you’re selling. I’m not joining you. Not now, probably not ever.”

“If you do not join us, then you are against us,” Cao Cao warned, the True Longinus glowing with magic. If it came to letting Jeanne be captured or something, he would take his chances to get away after wiping Ranma out right now. *I underestimated him, but I will not make that mistake twice.*

“Wow, that is such a villain phrase, dude!” Ranma laughed. “So the only question is, are you going to start a throw down right here, or like every megalomaniac villain in the universe, are you going to back away, shake your head sorrowfully at the lack of intelligence in your opponent and try another day.”

Cao Cao’s eyes narrowed. “I think the longer you spend with the Devils, you will find that they are the true evil here. But if you release Jeanne, we can both walk away from this.”

“Again, you’re giving me generalities, not specifics, man. I ain’t about that. I always take people as they come, always will. And what I see of you right now is a lot worse than what I’ve seen from Rias and the rest.” Ranma released Jeanne, smirking slightly at her. “Still, you do your thing, man, embrace your inner villain and practice your ‘Mwhaha.’ You can’t be a good villain without a good evil laugh.”

With that, Ranma was gone again, leaping down off the rooftop. Cao Cao moved forward and saw him down below, entering the ice cream shop like nothing had happened. "What an annoying young man."

Jeanne laughed. "Truly? I believe I rather like him."

"You were just trying to stab him," Cao Cao pointed out, looking at the woman carefully.

Jeanne shrugged. "So?"

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Elsewhere, although Ranma wouldn't know it, more trouble was looking for him. Happosai had been feeling off all day. As if silky darlings or even better had been on offer somewhere around his favorite toy, er, that is, his chosen successor, Ranma. But finding the boy was proving more difficult. "I could have sworn he was in Kuoh, but the only sign I've seen is that Shampoo girl. And of course, that means Cologne is around somewhere or will be soon. Ugh. Still... that doesn't mean that there aren't pretty girls galore around here!"

Down below him, a silver-haired girl passed by, talking to a lively tomboy of a girl, and being trailed by a few others. The only warning they got to the horror that had come to Kuoh was the call of "Hotcha!" from above them. Then the screaming began.

OOOOOOO

By the time Ranma got back with the ice cream, the last competition had ended. "It's about time you got back," Saeko chuckled, although she was watching Ranma with narrowed eyes. There was something off about Ranma, and for some reason, she didn't think it had anything to do with why Rias was looking so happy when she returned. *Regardless, we will need to sit down and talk about this, all three of us. But I wonder what else is bothering my beau.*

"Heh, let's just say my Pretentious Asshole Attraction Skill, patent-pending despite Kuno, damn it, acted up again. I'll tell you and the others about it later. It ain't important enough to wreck our fun." Ranma didn't want to mention the meeting he'd had, not willing to interrupt their fun. Looking around at the group, he noticed they were watching Kiba, Tsubaki, Saji and Issei at work to one side, taking the solid bands of conjured up magic off the contestants who did include Kasumi, comparing them to one another as they went over the scores.

Seeing Rias had left just enough space between her and Saeko, and both of them were giving him coquettish looks, Ranma sighed and decided to, just this once, give in to the inevitable. He handed the ice cream to Serafall, asking, "Could ya keep this cool until after we're done eatin'..."

“I’m done,” Koneko announced, suddenly standing beside the Maou and Ranma, looking at the box of ice cream with a predatory gaze, the remnants of the meal they had put together in Ranma’s absence behind her.

Serafall giggled, pulling out two of the ice cream cones before creating an icebox, a literal box made of ice, large enough to put the box of ice cream in. “One for you, and one for me. MMM, and you got big scoops too, Ranma. I like ‘em big,” she purred, causing Ranma to twitch, only for Serafall to squawk as Koneko slapped her still-swimsuit clad rear.

It didn’t hurt, of course. Even with Koneko’s Rook-given strength, Koneko wasn’t anywhere near strong enough to hurt Serafall. But it was certainly shocking. “What the heck, Koneko-chan!”

“Don’t purr. It’s demeaning, and you’re bothering Ranma,” Koneko huffed, taking her own ice cream and licking at it with her tiny tongue like a cat would cream. She paused then, smirking almost imperceptibly as she walked away. “Besides, you weren’t doing it right.”

Serafall pouted at that. But by the time she turned to resume her mission of turning Ranma into a puddle to join the way she had to the other boys – including Kiba - he had moved away, moving to sit between his two current love interests.

Might as well admit it to yourself if no one else, man. You spent a lot of the last two years lying to yourself about this and many other matters, better to know yourself in some fashion, right? And I am attracted to Rias and like being around her. So I suppose that means I’m interested in her, right?

As he sat down, the group of boys had finished, looking a little stunned by the results in the last contest, because it appeared that Kasumi had won, and by a wide margin too. Second place was Tsubaki. Saeko and Akeno had tied at eight hundred and forty glances for third place. They were followed by Gabriel and a stunned Serafall with only seven glances less than the Archangel. Xenovia came in last.

Yet by the overall competition’s rules, that meant both the powerhouses wouldn’t score even a point in this latest contest. “B, but Kasumi wasn’t even part of the contest!” Serafall stammered.

Shaking his head, Ranma guffawed, while Kasumi blushed rosily and tried to hide behind Saeko, who was somewhat amused by this turn of events, as well as somewhat annoyed none of the men who had approached her had been pushy enough for her to hurt. “I told you, I told you! You can’t beat the girl-next-door type. It just isn’t possible!”

“Gah, how could I have lost! I’m Magical Girl Levia-tan!” Serafall grumbled, though internally, she wasn’t as displeased as she was acting. Gabriel hadn’t won after all, and Serafall had gotten a lot more people actually walking up to talk to her. Many kids too, given her

magical girl outfit, so even though she had lost, Serafall had had enough fun that she didn't really care, as long as Gabby lost too.

Gabriel chuckled at this, taking her loss in this much more calmly than she had the loss from volleyball, even moving over to hug Kasumi, understanding what Ranma meant, and happily agreeing with it. While reaching for the impossible was a trait she much admired in humanity, knowing that most men would truly prefer a girl they could settle down and have a family with rather than an unattainable ideal was quite a pleasant thought. "Well done, my dear."

"Er, thank you, I suppose? But um, I, I really don't think I should be counted in this. I didn't participate in either of the other contests, and I have no desire to be the winner at all," Kasumi objected, shaking her head even as Asia added her congratulations to Gabriel's.

Issei smirked at that, knowing that Asia too had gotten a lot of glances while she went around with Koneko earlier. *Even the power of oppai loses in the face of the power of moe, especially innocent moe and gap moe combined! Then again, innocent oppai like Kasumi's is also a massive turn-on! You get to corrupt 'em, and only you would ever see that side of them.*

Shivering suddenly as if he felt someone was glaring at him, Issei twisted his eyes away from Kasumi, trying to blank his face as he did. "Well, in that case, who would the total winner be?" he then beamed happily. "Or we could have a tie-breaker round! I vote mud wrestling!"

"Rejected!" came from every throat there, bar Gabriel, who simply looked confused. "What is the allure of mud wrestling? Surely it is no better than regular wrestling?"

"How about just more poses? That's a simple one, and we could get Mousse to officiate that one since he's sure to be fair to every blur he sees," Saji joked.

"Low blow, dude," Ranma scowled, hurling a spoon at Saji, hitting him right in the eye.

"Agh, my eye, why, man, why!?" Saji moaned, reeling back and holding his eye in pain. *And how did he throw a spoon like that with such accuracy to hit me with the spoon end of it?*

Asia frowned, but not at the treatment of Saji. "Why did that comment make you angry, Ranma-san?"

"He was making fun of Mousse because he has poor eyesight. Making fun of him for that while you're in a fight with the guy is one thing. Making fun of it outside, not so much. Especially when there are so many other ways you can tease him," Ranma said laughingly, quickly grabbing the shuriken that the duck had just thrown his way.

"Oh, why didn't you say anything? Is it something you were born with, or something that developed over time?"

"Developed over time, Healer," Mousse wrote via a sign.

He then squawked as Ranma made to pour hot water over him from a pot he was suddenly holding. "Use your words, dude!"

Mousse quickly grabbed the pot out of the unresisting Ranma's hand, then ducked into the makeshift changing areas. A moment later, he was back out, dressed in his own pair of swimming boxers, to the interest of a few unattached girls there. He wasn't as built as Ranma was, but he was still in extremely good shape. "It is something that developed over time, Healer Asia. My parents were both nearsighted, and although it didn't look as if the trade had passed on to me, slowly as I grew, my eyesight started to fail."

"So it is something you are susceptible to, but not born with," Asia mused. "In that case, I might be able to heal it for you if you want me to try?"

Mousse could feel his jaw-dropping open at that, then he turned nearsightedly to where he had earlier heard Ranma's voice, his own voice serious as he, in fact, addressed an amused Saeko. "This contest, Asia wins. She wins hands down."

Asia blushed at that or raising her hands as twilight healing appeared on her fingers. "I, er, I'm not involved in the competition as it is, Mousse-san."

Giggling, Akeno moved over to hug the younger girl from behind, smooching the back of her head into Akeno's chest, causing Asia to blush and flail around for a moment. "Just take the compliment as it is meant, Asia-chan." *Hmm, and isn't he a handsome one. Although some of those scars on his hands and elbows are strange, just like Ranma's in many ways, though less numerous.*

Asia too, was flushing and looking away, while Kiba vowed to add some more crunches to his daily exercise. Issei wasn't looking, having spotted Rias stretching to one side, her chest almost bursting out of her bikini. Saji, though, was weeping angry tears and vowing to up his exercise regimen.

Healing Mousse's eyes was much harder than Asia had hoped. It did, alas, turn out to be more genetic than caused by exterior sources. However, Asia's power with Twilight Healing had grown in the past few months, thanks in part to discussions with Kasumi and then with Akeno and the other Devils on the nature of healing magic. Now, using how her own eyes worked as a template, she was able to figure out how to not just heal his eyes but bring Mousse's eyesight to the greatest level of acuity she could.

After about twenty minutes of intense work, Asia pulled back tiredly. She looked down at her rings, the gift of God she had been graced with, and kissed them both gently, whispering a prayer under her breath, low enough that the use of the term God didn't bother the Devils around her. Then she smiled prettily at Mousse while the rest of Ranma's group and Rias'

watched on, everyone holding their breath. "I think I'm done. But we won't know until you open your eyes, Mousse-san."

Mousse did so, then immediately frowned. "My eyes are still blurry," Mousse sighed. "Well, I thank you for your attempt, Healer, but..."

"Silly!" Asia giggled, one hand raising to her lips. "You're still wearing your glasses."

Mousse's eyes widened behind his glasses, then slowly, almost fearfully, Mousse reached up to his glasses, removing them. The first sight he saw was Asia's face, smiling up at him. She was a short little thing, he reflected, especially for the holder of such a magnificent healing power. "And she's pretty too, prettier even than my sweet Shampoo."

Asia's face blushed hotly, and she turned away shyly, poking her toes into the sand. "Er, u, um, thank you?"

"...Did I just say that out loud?" Mousse gasped, gaping and then slamming a palm over his mouth.

Ranma laughed, shaking his head. "Heh, nice one, dude!" he said, reflecting that, regardless of Cao Cao and the shit he was peddling, this had been a pretty good day. His eyes then strayed to Rias and Saeko, wincing a bit as he realized that as nice a day as this had been, the conversation this night was not going to be as fun. *Where the heck do we go from here?*

End Chapter

I had wanted to put in that conversation and the one where Ranma would explain what had happened to him as he was away from the others. But the rest of this chapter took me too many days to get finished thanks to RL. Family time is lovely but cuts writing time down from six or seven hours a day to at best two. **ARGH**. Still, this cut-off point makes sense at least, and this way, we have almost a full chapter devoted to simple fun after several extremely serious, hectic ones.