

I ain't a lady, nor Japanese.

Chapter 1: Rain, the Ultimate Peacekeeper.

Ranma Saotome, martial artist extraordinaire (in his mind) stared up at the rain coming down from the skies over China then over at his (currently her, long story) father, who was trudging along through the rapidly diminishing woodland and growled, "Screw this and your dumbass prediction, Old Man! Look at that sky, does it look like it's going to stop raining any time soon!?"

Genma turned, holding up a series of signs. As he was a nine-foot-tall panda at the moment, his signs were the only means he could use to communicate. Of course, he added his own fillip to the task, both in terms of general communication and the use of signs. "Boy, you're starting to sound like that form of yours!"

"What the hell does being a girl have to do with it!? We've been traveling for two days straight in, off again, on again rain and that rain looks to be coming down even heavier! I'm cold, tired, and hungry Old Man!" the redhead growled in return. "Besides, there's a perfectly suitable cave back the way we came. Let's get under cover and wait for this shit to blow over!"

The panda grumbled, and the sign, without any apparent stop to actually write something new, flipped, showing a message. "And what if that crazy Amazon catches up with you? What then?"

Ranma hesitated, and not just because of the mystery of the signs. They had been on the run from the Amazon warrior named Shampoo for more than...Ranma paused, thinking and realized she wasn't certain how long they'd been going since the Amazon village. Genma had been adamant about not retracing their steps, and, given how abruptly they'd had to move on in some cases, Ranma was certain that the old retard had been up to his tricks again.

He'd gotten better at making certain Ranma wouldn't find out, but beyond being a great martial artist, Genma was also an excellent thief at need. And his need ranged from food to liquor, while on the road along with little things here and there. Now, Ranma didn't have a problem with stealing food when you were starving or grabbing clothing when the alternative was going naked, but stealing martial arts scrolls? That was where she drew the line.

After all, why not just stick around, learn all the locals're willing to teach ya, then move on after? Then there had been that whole Dragon whisker thing. That had taken a few days to sort out. Ugh, worse thing is, I can only blame myself for that one, not like I can for Jusenkyo.

That was easily the height of his father's stupidity in Ranma's mind. *How the hell did Genma think going to a cursed springs was a good idea? And how the flipping ancestor-cursed dog humping FUCK did the old man not notice he had transformed into a panda before attacking me!?*

But whenever they had stopped since leaving the Amazon village, they had passed through near Jusenkyo for very long, Shampoo had caught them up. The girl, she was only Ranma's age, had been some kind of village champion, and they, starving from several days of no food, had eaten her prize. *Not my finest hour, I'll admit*, Ranma thought ruefully now, thinking back on that moment. *But she didn't have to be such a sore loser with the Kiss of Death crap.*

Since they had left her village, the Amazon girl had been on them like white on rice, always catching them up if they stayed too long in any location. It was almost enough to make Ranma impressed. *Hell, if she wasn't out to actually kill me, I think I would be impressed with her ability to track us down like that, to say nothing of keeping up with us.*

But she **was** out to kill Ranma, and Ranma tended to take that kind of thing personally. Shampoo was also more than willing to use bladed weapons, which Ranma was not very used to. Not from other martial artists anyway. Crooks, gangsters, people who his father and she had swindled out of their money when they bet on the young boy against that local champion, sure. That kind of people deserves whatever they got in Ranma's opinion.

But this, this was something new. Shampoo actually used real Chui and swords, and used them very well, better than most martial artists Ranma had run into before this. And Shampoo was a girl to boot. Despite the fact that he'd spent a few months now (he'd spent more than a month trying to chase his old man down to beat him up, but eventually tired of not succeeding) as a girl himself occasionally, Ranma still didn't think much of women warriors. *And then there's the whole where-to-hit-her-thing. I mean, would it be perverted if I hit her in the boobies? And how hard can I hit her anyway? I didn't hold back much when I laid her out in our match but she was up again in like a minute.*

"If she catches us up, I'd rather fight her off after getting nice and warm, if not well fed, since I know we don't have any foot left. Come on old man, the rain's coming down even harder now!" the soaked redhead answered at last, as another peel of lightning flew across the sky.

The lightning changed his father's opinion. Looking ahead of them, Genma could see they were about to start to leave the forests behind, and head into the plains of the low country. In that kind of area, Genma might become the largest thing around quickly, and as such attract the lightning. As such, he once more flipped his sign, and somehow the first message he had shown Ranma had been replaced. "Very well boy, you've got a point but where should we go?"

Ranma waved her arm back the way they came. "There was a break in the cover about an hour ago and I looked up that hillside to the left. I already told you I saw a cave there. If it's deep enough, it could serve us as shelter."

His father grumbled back, but nodded. she didn't like the idea of retracing their steps, but that was neither here nor there. Getting dry at the very least would be an excellent idea. *Times like this I wish I had more than one gi. Still, such a hardship is just part of following the path of a martial artist. And bear was a much better buy anyway.*

The two of them reached the cave easily enough, but the rain, already heavy, had indeed started to come down in sheets, so much so that Ranma could barely see a foot in front of herself, and knew for a fact that it wasn't all that long until any attempt to find their way would have been

impossible. "Look at that Old Man, I was right," she observed grumpily, kicking her father for good measure, wringing her drenched hair out.

The Old Man growled, but Ranma grabbed his sign, and broke it across her knee, tossing it into the center of the cave. It was a good-sized one, thankfully, with a bit of clearance above them even for the bear, and more than enough room for a dozen people comfortably. "I ain't interested in your excuses or taunts right now Old Man. We need a fire, we need to get warm! Or else we're both going to catch our death of pneumonia."

Another sign appeared in the panda's hand saying, "Boy, you haven't been sick a day in your life. Stop..."

Then it disappeared as Ranma grabbed it in turn, scowling at him as she once more broke the sign, noting that both had been soaked, darn it. "There's a first time for everything!"

Rolling his eyes, Genma pulled out some flint and tinder, tossing them onto the dry ground of the cave. Then, feeling thankful for his fur once more, Genma turned away, reaching into his bag once more and pulling out a bit pickings of food that he had been saving and hiding from Ranma.

Unfortunately, eating quietly was not a panda skill, and Ranma heard his chewing over the sound of his breaking the signs. "What the hell!" Ranma charged towards her father. "You had food this whole time!"

Another sign read, "Finders keepers," flip came the sign, with larger calligraphy this time, "boy!"

There was a crack of thunder and lightning behind them, causing the bear to flinch and look in that direction. That allowed Ranma to bounce up off of the roof of the cave, coming down with a hammer kick straight on top of the panda's head, sending him unconscious to the ground.

"Hell yes!" Ranma shouted, flinging her arms in the air. Then she grabbed the bear, and pulled it deeper into the cave, tossing it to one side of the mound of wet wood, and then began to search in Genma's pack, knowing everything in her own had been drenched. *I've still got my knife and a few campout supplies plus my bedroll, but it's all drenched, damn it!*

Inside his father's bag, Ranma found a few wrapped bits of chicken, a few dumplings, a day old but still good and even a bottle of water. *What the heck is an Evian bottle doing here?* Shaking off the mystery of the west's commercial reach, Ranma she growled at her father angrily. "Oh sure, 'we haven't had food for days boy' quote, 'you have to learn to live off the land again boy, you're going soft.' Why don't you try to practice what ya preach, Old Fart!"

Still grumbling to herself, she found a warm piece of cloth, and tossed that down, looking morosely at the wet wood and the even sorer state of her bedroll and clothing. There was little chance of the wood catching, and Ranma scowled shivering. "Damn, but at least it's a nice summer day, not winter. I can survive one night wet and miserable."

With a sigh, she pulled out of her wet clothing, tossing her shirt and pants down to join the rest of her soaked things, standing there naked, bar her boxers and feeling quite a bit like a drowned rat in all honesty. "Feh, China weather during the monsoon season. You can keep it!"

Just as she was about to sit down, a sound by the cave doorway caused her to turn that direction. It sounded as if someone was running for the cave, and Ranma blinked in surprise. *Who would be out in this weatherrr.... oh don't tell me...*

A second later, Ranma gaped as Shampoo of the Amazons entered, running inside the cave quickly, hunched over against the rain. As she entered, Shampoo straightened, breathing out a sigh of relief, until she caught sight of the redhead, her eyes widening in shock.

As Shampoo stared, Ranma got over her own shock quickly to notice something. The other girl, who had always previously only ever looked poised and well-groomed looked just as bedraggled and wet as Ranma did, something Ranma couldn't help but notice thanks to how her clothing was clinging to the purple-haired girl like a second skin. And her surprise at seeing Ranma was also obvious.

Thinking quickly, Ranma forced her gaze to not stray back down to away from the other girl's chest again, and held up her hands and seeing the other girl readying herself to charge, decided to try out her new skill in speaking Chinese. "Truce!"

That brought the girl up quickly, and she scowled, pausing in taking her stance, shivering as a burst of wind entered the cave. Ranma nodded frantically pointing at her. "Truce! Both wet, both no good."

"Your Chinese is like that of a retarded child," Shampoo muttered, but she made no move to attack Ranma, turning aside slightly to ring out her hair, grumbling.

Frankly, this week had been among the most miserable of her entire life and standing there drenched to the bone, Xian Pu of the Joketsuku damned how quick she had been to give the foreigner the Kiss of Death. When she had done it, Shampoo – she knew how foreigners mangled her name and it amused her - had thought it would be a means of escaping the village for a time. Shampoo loved her home, but it was kind of stifling lately. She disliked how some of the Blooded Warriors resented her skill, thinking her too big for her panties thanks to being able to fight them on an even footing despite her young age. Beyond that, Shampoo had seen the some of the books that the local peddlers traded for and thought the ones showing maps of the world and especially the pictures were amazing.

She also, bluntly, wanted to get away from Mousse, her childhood friend turned stalker. It was rapidly getting to the point where she would have to choose between killing him or accepting his hand in marriage. Shampoo did not think about the blind Mousse in that manner, and yet, when they were young, they had been deep close friends. But by the laws of the tribe, it was either one or the other, and it would only become worse once Shampoo hits 17. At that point, Shampoo would be either forced to become a Blooded Warrior and if Mousse pestered her then...

At first it had worked very well. Shampoo had enjoyed traveling, and the panda and the redhead had left an easy trail to follow. She enjoyed seeing new places and had even stayed at a hotel that had

hundreds of TV channels! Some of the shows were amazing, especially the ones showing translated foreign shows.

But then the weather changed, and now Shampoo was wet, cold, and, and muddy from the hips down. She had nearly been caught in not one, but two different landslides, and one of them had turned into a mudslide that had captured one of her legs, sending her down into the muck and mire. Luckily the rain had washed most of it away.

So, Shampoo was not in the mood for a fight. *And fighting someone who is just as wet and who also is nearly naked is dishonorable anyway.* Shampoo let her eyes trail downwards, noting how fit the other girl looked. *Huh... she's only what, a size smaller than me? Funny on such a short girl, and her waist actually might be smaller than mine too. But what is up with her underwear? "Why Boxers?"* she asked quizzically, cocking her head to one side. "Are they comfortable?"

Then Shampoo shook her head, remembering the wet, miserable redhead was her target, and that she had just spoken in decent Putonghua. "You didn't know Chinese when you were in my village!" *Was this outsider toying with us the whole time?* If that was the case Shampoo would attack, miserable or not.

Ranma quickly shook her head, which would normally send her pigtail flying, but her hair was still so wet it barely moved. "No, I learn since. Not good too." Ranma shrugged then pointed at Shampoo, saying dryly, "Running not good learn."

"Heh." Shampoo smirked a little at that, feeling a bit of pride at having been the reason why Ranma and her panda had been forced to move so fast. Then her stomach rumbled, and Ranma grinned. The next second, something was flying towards her head, and Shampoo was about to duck reflexively, when she saw what it was: a meat bun.

She grabbed it out of the air, it was cold, but still good camp fair, and she munched down on it. "Truce accepted," she muttered through a full mouth

With a grin, Ranma nodded, trying hard not to stare. But Shampoo was... well a **girl!** And Ranma had never been this close to a girl before for so long that wasn't trying to fight him, and certainly never in the presence of a girl who was so wet, drenched as she was. She was having trouble keeping his eyes away from the other girl's chest, where she could see the outlines of a somewhat abused breast band. Ranma also instinctively knew Shampoo's breasts were larger than her own, and would fill up his hands very nicely. Shampoo's hips and thighs too were barely covered and as she turned away to glance outside, Ranma bit back a grunt at her perfect rear.

Unhappy or not, Shampoo was one heck of a sight right now, and Ranma hadn't had any experience being this close to such a sight. The only thing she could compare it to was the few times she and his father had traveled through a red-light district. And then, the fakeness of it all, the overdone nature of the women, had repelled Ranma. But Shampoo was a fellow martial artist, his age, no longer trying to kill him, very good looking and well, it was just very hard not to stare right now.

Damn, who knew that I'd ever be grateful for this curse. If I was in my real body, I would be having a really awkward boner right now.

Just because she had been on the road for most of his life the meeting that Ranma didn't know anything about girls and boys and reacting and stuff like that. Romance, that Ranma knew she didn't know, and modesty she had no time for. But birds and bees, yes.

Across from him, Shampoo finished her meat bun, grinning somewhat cheerfully now that she had some food. She held up her hands, waving them theatrically, "Look, nothing up my sleeve, but..."

The next second, she was holding two large cobs of wood, that Ranma could tell were dry. she blinked in shock, then quickly grabbed the electric lighter, taking out a tiny tin of oil, pouring it out onto one of the logs. It quickly came alight and Ranma moved the rest of the wet wood nearby to dry, along with her clothing.

"You don't have any other clothing?" Shampoo asked questioningly. She was used to being around other women naked occasionally, but at the moment it was kind of off-putting.

Ranma shrugged, completely unconcerned. "I no know say."

Shampoo groaned, then tugged at her own wet shirt, watching the girl's eyes travel to it, and a blush appear. *Huh, that's funny.* "This is clothing," she emphasized the word. "Do you have any?"

Ranma pointed at the second lump of clothing now set by the fire along with his sleeping bag. "That only."

Shampoo grumbled, and in an effort to not look at the naked girl who was her target, looked at the bear. It was unconscious, a large lump visible on its head. "Did you do that? Did your attack panda turn on you?"

"Panda," Ranma nodded. "It fight, I win." Ranma figured that was easier to say than explain the Old Man had been holding out on him.

Shampoo nodded, but the sight of the panda brought her back to what the law of the Amazons told Shampoo she should be doing right now: fighting this redhead and killing her for the dishonor of her loss. She looked at Ranma speculatively, a scowl on her face.

Ranma caught the look, the scowl appearing on the pretty Chinese girl's face, and then very deliberately drop kicked the way that she had just thought of her out of her mind, turning back to the fire, and pulling out some of the other bits of food, settling the cold chicken cutlets on bits of wet wood, splinters from the signs doing double duty as skewers. "You know weather?"

At that question, Shampoo broke out of her murderous thoughts, nodding and Ranma went on. "How long..." she paused, then tried again. "Rain how..."

Once more she stammered to a halt. "Dammit, I should've made a better push to try and learn some Chinese! But no, 'it's a waste of time boy, if they don't understand that you're challenging them, then they're stupid, and they deserve to lose. And if we need something they should understand us regardless, we're not here to try to civilize these barbarians.' Dammit pops! Why the hell do I ever listen to you!?"

During the rant, Shampoo had watched the redhead, seemingly extremely frustrated add her own inability to communicate, and now she laughed as the girl actually used different tones of voice to herself as if she was having an argument with someone. She had no idea what Ranma was saying though. Shampoo knew it was Japanese, but that was about it. Given the Amazons' attitude towards the Japanese, a holdover from World War II, learning Japanese was seen as something only the Elders had to do, as part of the penance of being Elders in the first place.

Killing the Japanese on the other hand, that was something a lot of people among her mother's generation and older could tell stories about. The war against them was so bad that even children as young as 12 among the Amazons had been called to serve. But that service had won them their independence from the communists.

For now anyway. Shampoo knew that her grandmother was a little concerned about that, but only a little. The Bayankala Mountains where her people resided was far too remote, far too hard to get to for modern warfare. "The great Mao Zedong bragged about his Million Mile March, but he never went through these mountains, in fact, he deliberately skirted them," her grandmother had told Shampoo several times.

Still that was not important right now. "The rain will last several days," she announced. Then she repeated herself slower, enunciating each word clearly, so that Ranma could get the gist of what she was saying. "It will be very heavy."

Ranma groaned, then looked down at her clothing, then out to the rain. "Heavier than this?" She asked in Japanese, then groaned and repeated herself "Heavier rain?" and then pointed out the with end of the cave.

"Yes. It will get heavier very soon, and stay that way for at least a few days," Shampoo answered, once more speaking slowly and clearly.

Ranma sat, then stoop up resolutely, not bothering to put on her clothing. *Besides, I've still got boxers, they cover the most important bits.* Moving towards the doorway, she stated, "I go hunt."

Blinked at that Shampoo laughed. "What animal do you think is going to be out in this mess!"

Ranma didn't understand most of the words, but she knew she was being laughed at, and pointed up and away up the hill. "I see sheep. Farmer not all need."

Once more Shampoo blinked, then slowly nodded, correcting the sentence absently. "Yes, I suppose sheep would be dumb enough to be out in this, especially if one has escaped from its paddock." She stood up to, reluctance in every portion of her body. She did **not** want to go back out into that, but Shampoo would be darned if the redhead was the only one willing to put in some more work to make this cave a bit more hospitable. "I'll go too, I'll gather some wood for us."

When she understood what she was saying, Ranma nodded, then made a wait here gesture, before moving back to did not his bag, pulling out a small, hand-sized hatchet. Shampoo tensed instantly, but Ranma flipped it so that she was holding the blade, holding out the shaft to her. Shampoo

smiled at that, it would save her weapons some wear and tear, and if this foreigner thought that she was unarmed beyond the hatchet, well, that was all to the good for now.

She looked over the bear, gesturing at it. "What about the bear? What are we going to do with it?"

Ranma turned to look at her father speculatively. A part of her wanted to wake the Old Man up and get him helping. It would give them a two on one advantage in close quarters if Shampoo decided to start anything. But frankly now that she was able to communicate with her no matter how badly, Shampoo seems pretty reasonable so far. *No, the old man would only make this more complicated.*

With that thought, Ranma moved over to one of the rocks inside the cave, lifted it up, and brought it crashing down on top of the bear's head. The carefully aimed blow laid out the panda, further, and would keep the older man out for a much longer time than the previous blow alone. She then shrugged her shoulders. "It not awake, it not need eat."

Shampoo laughed, nodded, and then turned to stare out into the rain again, her good-humor vanishing at the sight of the rain pounding down. Ranma moved to stand next to her, on the opposite side of the hand holding the hatchet. There was no sense in tempting the girl after all. Shampoo looked at her, shaking her head at the fact that the other girl hadn't bothered to put on her clothing. *Is she some kind of exhibitionist maybe? Or is she just that determined not to get her clothing even wetter.*

Ranma didn't notice the look, squared her shoulders, then held up her fingers counting down wordlessly. Shampoo grimaced, but when Ranma clenched her hand, both of them leapt out into the rain, then quickly moved in different directions.

OOOOOOO

"I tell you I saw one! A naked nymph, just like in those fairy tales the Brits used to tell during the war," an old man exclaimed, waving his crutch around.

"And I am telling you, you have been drinking your own moonshine too much," scoffed a much younger man. "There is no such thing!"

"I tell you I saw her. Almost naked save for a pair of boxers, tits the size of your hands, hair as red as blood!"

"Well, there you have it, why would a nymph wear Boxers?"

The first interlocutor paused, staring at this, and then frowned, thinking about it. "Remnants of her last victim?"

This earned him a smack upside the head, and the two farmers continued to look around for the lost sheep, grateful for their ponchos.

OOOOOOO

Ranma came back to the cave, shaking her head, and tossing the sheep before her, grateful that Shampoo had made it back before her. Shampoo solemnly handed Ranma her hatchet, gesturing down to the woods she gathered. "I hope that's enough because I am not going back out into that! Not if it isn't life or death."

the redhead nodded, having understood the words 'not going,' and getting the gist of the rest of the sentence. She had held up the sheep, and then set it down on the flat ground away from the fire. I snapped its neck," she said in Japanese, then remembering herself, gestured to the sheep's neck, and made a twisting motion with her hands.

Shampoo wordlessly knelt beside her, and Ranma tried hard not to look at the girl. With Ranma gone, she had also divested herself of her clothing, setting it by the fire. And the breast band she was wearing was very obviously not big enough, her breasts swaying gently despite the obvious muscle on the other woman. Below that a toned, hard, muscled stomach led Ranma's eyes down to where she could see a thatch of light purple hair over...

Even though she turned away, the sight was already burned indelibly into Ranma's brain and her heart pounded as Ranma once more was very grateful she was in a female body right now. *At least in this form I ain't gonna embarrass myself or give Shampoo a reason to kill me... again. Hell, do women even, you know, have anything that...* Ranma broke off that thought, shaking his head.

Huh, she must be cold with how hard her nipples are, Shampoo mused, looking concerned for a moment. *And my word, they are a really startling shade of crimson, aren't they?*

For a few moments, the two women were silent, their animosity washed away with the miserable conditions and the rain. They skinned the sheep, set the creature to one side on a makeshift rack to be blooded, and then Ranma braved the outside to set the outer fur out, letting the rain wash it for a about an hour before bringing it back in, setting it by the fire to be warmed.

Shampoo and Ranma actually worked quite well together during this, both of them somewhat surprised at the other's skill. Eventually, they were done with the animal for now, and would just have to wait for the blood to be drained, so that they could start carving out cutlets. By that point, Ranma's clothing at least was dry, and she pulled it on with relief, patting herself and muttering about her chest under her breath, only now noticing her hardened nipples. "Damn but if these things don't get cold! And um... jeez, they are kind of sensitive too, huh..."

Ignoring how the redhead was basically feeling herself up for a moment, Shampoo stared morosely at her own clothing, then with a shrug, lay out on the ground beside it, pulling off her breast band.

Seeing this out of the corner of her eye Ranma gulped and turned, unable to stop herself. They weren't the first set of breasts Ranma had ever seen, heck even Ranma's cursed form weren't. That first had involved a wild escape from a group of yakuza who had more modern weapons than the two Saotomes had wanted to deal with, and connections with the local militia. But thankfully they hadn't thought of looking on the rooftop of a communal bathing area, where Ranma and Genma had hidden themselves. Ranma hadn't meant to, but his eyes had strayed downwards more than once.

But while Shampoo's weren't the first, they were certainly by far the best. Ranma instantly could see they were indeed larger than Ranma's female form. They were also fuller looking, despite how perky they were. Ranma estimated they would be more than a handful even in his male form. Shampoo's nipples were astonishingly a very light pink.

Realizing she was staring, Ranma quickly looked away, moving over to make sure that Genma wasn't waking up by the simple expedient of dropping another rock on his head.

Shampoo didn't notice Ranma's staring, instead looking at her pile of clothing as it gently steamed by the fire, adding another cob of wood to it. "I really have to start using my weapons space more. I know Mousse only uses it for actual weapons, but surely, I could have packed in a few changes of clothing. Grabbing dry wood before the rain began was a good move, but some more forward planning would have been even better," she murmured to herself before frowning over at the noise of the blow to the panda's head. "Why you do you keep concussing that poor animal?"

Ranma understood animal there, and shrugged, gesturing to Genma. "It not well train," she said in his pigeon Chinese. "It trouble."

"Are you going to say that it was the first one to reach the winners table holding my prize for the tournament?" Shampoo asked archly. "Using a poor dumb animal as the scapegoat isn't very honorable."

Again, Ranma didn't get much of that, and so didn't answer simply cocking his head to one side and shaking her head. Shampoo scowled, and then sighed, looking over at her clothing again. But then Ranma's voice caught her attention. "Now we food, shelter, warm, talk yes?"

"What's there to talk about?" Shampoo growled, her ire returning. "You stole my prize for winning the tournament, and then, in my weakened state, you humiliated me! The law says that I can kill you for that and I will."

Even as she spoke, Shampoo had to push down all of her insecurities about actually killing someone, using the anger she had felt at the time of her humiliation to do so. *Yes, she deserves death for humiliating me like that after a full day of fighting, taking advantage of my weakness like that!*

But Ranma shook her head, waving her hands frantically. She might not have understood a lot of the words there, but the tone had certainly come through. Ranma spoke in Japanese for a few seconds, before remembering herself, and switching back to her pidgin Chinese, grumbling internally again. *Stupid Old Man!*

"I know you mad," she said, spelling out the word mad, hoping it came across. "But we stuck..." Ranma had to think of a word to use for the word stuck, and then finally gave up, just gesturing out the entrance of the cave to the torrential rain down coming down. It even looked worse than it had when they'd rushed out to grab gather up firewood and the sheep. "So why not..." Ranma paused, then just stood up and got into a stance, miming some punches towards the wall, then gesturing towards Shampoo.

“You want us to fight in here?” Shampoo frowned. “I thought the whole point of this.” Shampoo gestured towards the meal the fire and everything else, “was to keep from doing so. If you’re feeling well enough, that’s one thing, but as much as I’d like to, I’m not.”

The word fight Ranma knew, and she shook her head. “train. Train fight.”

“You mean a spar?” Shampoo murmured, frowning. “Why? My honor demands...”

Ranma interrupted her, gesturing to her cheek. “You kiss, that, you mean kill. But me not want die. You want to keep chase?”

“Well... not really,” Shampoo admitted. *Being away from the village is nice, but I could do without chasing Ranma and her pet panda all over the place.*

“So we spar!” Ranma announced excitedly, holding up three fingers. “Two three, two three winner.”

Now that interested Shampoo, if she was indeed getting the gist of what Ranma was suggesting. *It is unusual, but if I can take the outsider best two out of three, that would justify my honor, and, it would prove to everyone that my winning the championship wasn’t a fluke, regardless of my age!* Thinking things through, Shampoo nodded firmly. “What are the rules?”

Realizing from her blank face that Ranma hadn’t understood her, Shampoo sighed, and then explained what she meant slowly and clearly before grumbling, “And when we’re not fighting, I’m going to be teaching actual Chinese!”

“Agree,” Ranma replied instantly, nodding just as firmly as Shampoo had. “Hate not talk.”

“That would be I hate not to being able to speak well I think,” Shampoo drawled. “I can help you with your vocabulary and correct your sentences as we go along. Whether or not that translates to you actually being able to speak intelligently is up to you.”

The dig went right over her head unfortunately, and Shampoo sighed. That was no fun. So, she repeated her earlier question. Ranma understood this time and held up one finger. “One time, hands only. Second time, weapons. Third time, on log, anything goes.”

Despite his mangling of Putonghua, the gist of what Ranma was saying got through, and after a few seconds contemplation, Shampoo nodded. “That makes good sense. I like it. We will start tomorrow, yes?”

That Ranma understood and nodded. Then, with the serious stuff abandoned, Ranma moved towards the fire, and gestured Shampoo down with them. “I know this fire,” she used the Chinese term for fire, pointing at the wire, and saying the words in Chinese. “Start there?”

Shampoo sighed. Teaching Ranma how to speak Chinese wasn’t her idea of fun, but neither was hearing her so disrespect the Chinese language. “Let’s make a deal. You teach me how to speak Japanese, or at least my vocabulary, I teach you Chinese.”

However, before they could get too deeply into a language lesson, Genma stirred despite the multiple blows to the head. And the first thing Genma saw was Shampoo sitting by the fire. And automatically, Genma attacked, roaring and growling as he charged forwards. He made to bat Shampoo aside, grab up the boy and run out only the sight of the torrential rain pausing at the sight in dismay as lightning flashed across the sky.

Shampoo went flying into the side the cave, grunting on the impact, while Ranma but was able to duck under the paw that would've grabbed at him, kicking up and off the ground shouting out "Dammit Old Man, why do you have to ruin everything!"

A kick caught the panda in the chin, and Shampoo came up and off of the side of the cave, thrusting forward with her Chuis, having thankfully been able to dress during the short language lesson. The panda blocked them, and began to attack both girls, growling out 'what the hell is going on here boy!' in panda. But Ranma had divested him of all of his signs, having piled them up next to the fire to be dried.

Shampoo gaped seeing a panda, quick enough to dodge her attacks, although it was a near run thing and bits of her clothing got shredded more than once, as did the redhead's, before a lucky blow sent the panda stumbling into the side of the cave. As the panda pushed off the wall, Shampoo was able to get below its lunge, striking out hard up into the bear's privates. Not having anticipated that at all – it was a target few martial artists would go for - the panda gasped as his furry privates were introduced to the large Chuis heads and doubled over lost in his own private agony, until Ranma brought down a rock onto the panda's head, then stomped on it several times for good measure.

For a moment, the two girls were silent, and then Shampoo giggled. "You are right, it is a very poorly trained animal. In terms of respecting you anyway."

Ranma shrugged battle off, not understanding with the other girl had said but understanding she was at least in a good mood. "I get rope?"

Nodded firmly Shampoo once more reached into her ki space. She had brought a long rope along just in case she had to scaling the cliffs or make a bridge for herself, which in the mountains, was almost a given. *I thought of that but didn't think about spare clothing. Maybe Grandmother is right, I am a bit scatterbrained.*

Now it came in handy for a different reason, letting the two of them tied Genma up, and then Shampoo watched as Ranma lifted the panda into the air, setting it down so that it was blocking some of the wind from coming in. Almost instantly this had in fact, warming the cave by margin and Shampoo smiled gratefully, feeling much more comfortable in a few seconds.

For her part, Ranma was oblivious of the other girls' stares, as she made certain that Genma's wrists were tied together, and then muzzled the panda for good measure. *Maybe I should look into that rope martial arts school I saw once when we get back to Japan. What was it called combat style Shib-something? Could be useful.*

After that excitement, both girls curled up in the now slowly warming cave, have some food, and talked until they started to feel tired. Then Ranma offered Shampoo her sleeping bag, noticing that

Shampoo didn't have one. Shampoo was about to refuse but then shrugged and nodded. She even thought about offering to share it, but didn't. As friendly as they were being, the redhead was still a veritable stranger and also someone she was going to have to fight tomorrow.

Not knowing how close he had come to death by blood loss or embarrassment, Ranma laid out on the other side of the fire, placing a bit more wood there before closing her eyes and going to sleep quickly. The two of them had to wake up occasionally thanks to Genma shuffling about, but a few boulders smacked to the head shut him up quickly.

The next day both of them woke up refreshed and warm, but the fire had gone out. Ranma was working on that, as Shampoo began to prepare strips of the sheep's fat for breakfast. They spent the morning making up a meal for the rest of the day, while Shampoo instructed Ranma on Chinese. She found Ranma was a quick student, remembering words after only a few repetitions. It would be some time yet before Ranma could create fully sentences but being able to communicate to Ranma would be much easier. In turn, Shampoo asked Ranma about Japanese and the places he had been, finding the topic a fun conversation.

However, the afternoon saw them standing at either side of the cave, both of them taking martial arts stances. Normally, Ranma wouldn't do this, taking an actual stance instead of simply standing loose and ready for anything. This also annoyed your opponent something fierce. But for this combat, Ranma decided that would be counterproductive. Getting Shampoo angrier wasn't needed. "We say 1, 2, 3 and begin at 3, yes?"

Shampoo nodded seriously, crouching down, her hands clenched in front of her as she took up a stance from the Joketsuzoku Wushu. Ranma surprised her by taking up a stance from Wing Chun, a Chinese martial art instead of anything she would recognize as Japanese. "Ready, go." With that the two girls charged forward.

Around ten minutes later, Shampoo over-extended very slightly and a bare second later found her back slamming down onto the ground. Before she could recover Ranma grabbed her arm, her legs going over Shampoo's body as she locked in a submission hold from a grappling martial arts school.

The purple haired girl cursed, slapping her free hand, and tried to get out of it but Ranma kept a tight grip on her arm, pressing Shampoo's arm into Ranma's breasts as she did so, something Ranma tried not to notice. "Give up. I break your arm, you not able win others."

Shampoo grumbled, but also tapped her free hand on the ground of the cave three times. Ranma nodded at that, let go, and allowed Shampoo to roll away, before flipping to her feet. "You speed good, but you not used to no weapon?"

Gone was any hesitation or awkwardness, as had been the case when they had been trying to think of something to talk about that morning, or during the language lessons. This was martial arts, and both of them were passionate about it. When Shampoo replied, Ranma began to deconstruct the fight in a such a way that Shampoo's eyes widened, but she listened intently, likening it to a lecture from one of the elders. It was really impressive.

The fight had invigorated both of them, and they spent the rest of the day talking quietly, listening to the sound of rain outside, and exchanging some of the fire on the fireplace. Ranma found Shampoo a very dedicated martial artist, although she had no idea of the styles that Ranma had been subjected to over her lifetime. A lot of her training had been in how to live off the land, hunting with bow and arrow, and fighting with dozens of different weapons.

Hearing that, Ranma had the sinking suspicion that when it came to weapons combat, she was going to lose, either on a technicality, i.e. going for a strike without a weapon, or just because Shampoo was better at using them. The Chuis were her favored weapon, but she was as also very advanced when it came to ki manipulation. The whole weapons space thing was fascinating, as was the fact that every Amazon knew about ki.

Up to this point, Ranma had only a vague understanding of ki, and only when it came to how quickly her body healed from injuries and how utterly immune to becoming sick she was. Ki space though was eager to try and figure it out if she could do the same thing.

In turn, Shampoo was simply astonished at how much different styles Ranma had incorporated into her own. The idea of going around and taking bits and pieces of other people's martial arts styles was a bit unusual, and Shampoo thought it was a bit rude, which Ranma agreed to. Sometimes they not like it. My Oyaji, er father, he not such good person."

Shampoo understood that Ranma's father had been the one to send her on this training journey, but when asked where he was, Ranma dodged the question, and continued to ask Shampoo questions of her own training. In this vein, the two of them continue to get to know one another, something that Shampoo somewhat regretted as she stood across from the redhead later that day for their second of three bouts. *After all, if the elders decide that this best two out of three idea wasn't good enough, or if I lost, I'd be right back to trying to hunt Ranma down to kill her.*

The fact that Ranma had to make do with one of Shampoo's weapons, a long spear, made her smile somewhat, believing she would have the advantage.

But as the fight began, Shampoo was reminded of a simple fact. Ranma was faster and stronger than Shampoo. As much as Shampoo had decided she wanted to find Ranma's father and play his head like a bongo with her Chuis the fact remained that Ranma's training had been insanely harder than her own. *Without a weapon in her hand I bet Ranma could make even grandmother sweat!* Realizing this for fact rather than able to assume it had been her tiredness that let Ranma win against Shampoo in her village lit a fire under Shampoo. *I will get better than this! I will become stronger!*

But then, Ranma made a mistake. As she leaped into the air to bring her spear flashing down, the back of the spear caught on one of the small stalactites on the roof of the cave. That messed up her downward thrust enough for Shampoo duck forward. Her sweeping Chui caught Ranma and upending Ranma in midair. "Hiyaa!"

The next blow flashed down towards Ranma's head in midair, but somehow she dodged it, landing and thrusting. But Ranma's back was now to the walls on two sides with no room to maneuver upward, and when Shampoo danced around her spear thrust, Ranma couldn't dodge again. The Chui tapped against Ranma's forehead gently.

“That’s a win for me!” Shampoo shouted, delightedly doing a little victory dance. *By Athena that feels good!*

Watching her, Ranma grinned, shaking her head, and nodding ruefully. “Win for you,” the redhead agreed before switching to Japanese. “And that’ll teach me to remember the environment darn it. I lost way too much of my midair ability when I tried to use a spear inside a cave that has a varied ceiling.”

Nod understanding much of that, Shampoo continued to smile even as she rolled one sword shoulder. “That only leaves the log challenge.” As one, the two women turned, staring over the bulk of the panda to the outside where it continued to rain cats and dogs.

“No now?” Ranma suggested.

Shampoo nodded firmly. “I am not going out in that again. Not until that much clears up.”

Ranma’s stomach chose that moment to growl, the sound echoing around the cave, and Ranma blushed, placing her hands around her stomach trying to make herself look even smaller than normal as Shampoo stared at her, then began to giggle. “Food’s a good idea, yes?”

With that, Shampoo moved over to the fire, putting a bit more of the wood on top of it, and then pulled over more of the sheep meat, laying it down on a flat stone as Ranma presented it, having founded near the back of the cave. “Sheep meat isn’t my favorite, but maybe we can make something edible.”

Ranma nodded firm agreement that idea, despite having only understood two out of every five words. Still she was getting better, and as they worked on the meal, Shampoo continued her education, enhancing her vocabulary further.

The rain didn’t let up for the rest of that day, and only began to peter out around midday two days later. By that point, Ranma and Shampoo were actually on their way to becoming friends, something Shampoo wouldn’t have ever put money on. Ranma was simply too friendly and too upbeat to really dislike a personality, which called out to Shampoo’s own upbeat attitude. Ranma also wasn’t someone who took life all that seriously outside of her martial arts training.

And there? Well, Ranma had given her a lot of different tips for training exercises and introduced her to several styles. Most were designed for unarmed combat, but Shampoo knew she could transfer them into her own style, much like Ranma had done. That was pretty excellent in her opinion. In particular one of the training ideas would let Shampoo segue into her clan’s Kachu Tenshin Amaguriken training, a type of speed training that would make her up to fifteen times faster than Shampoo was now.

The two of them had spent several hours each day just exercising, with Ranma giving Shampoo a few tips, and Shampoo to her surprise, giving Ranma a few. Some of these had to do with being a woman, some had to do with martial arts. But she was careful not to share any of her clan’s secret techniques or training outside of the ki space technique, which she knew other people could use. After Shampoo won and they could become real friends, then maybe as a Clan Friend Ranma could be allowed

to learn them... along with Shampoo herself. She had seen the training but had not gone through it herself.

Regardless, in the late afternoon of the fourth day, the two women stood across from one another on a makeshift log they had chopped down and moved into an empty field near the cave. As she watched the other woman stretch, lifting a leg straight upright against her chest, and then pirouetting stretching out her calf and ankle, Shampoo shook her head, noticing a certain bounce to the chest area that shouldn't have been there. *How the heck does she not know about the need for breast bands?*

They aren't as large as mine, but they are certainly a decent handful.

Regardless, Ranma's not knowing about breasts bands, her use of boy boxers and her general lack of feminine dignity or modesty amused Shampoo greatly. It was very clear that being on the road on her own, with her only companionship a panda of all things, hadn't done Ranma any favors in the area of femininity.

Still, she is strong and likable. Maybe after I beat her, I can introduce her to the tribe, instead of just declaring her a Clan Friend. I think she'd fit right in, and having another friend, in particular one who has seen so much of China and the rest of Asia, would be fun. Those books she mentioned, the graphic novels sound amazing. Far better than the Maoist drabble that the traders always try to foist off on us.

Shaking her head, Shampoo put such distant thoughts out of her mind as she continued to stretch herself, staring across at her opponent. It was a nice, bright sunny day now, although the ground was still very mushy, and would remain so for many days to come. Hopefully the good weather would continue. Traveling back to her village would be much easier and that kind of weather. *Although I don't honestly know if I want to go right back. Maybe I can... meander a bit. See the sights some more.*

Once more her introspection was broken, but this time by Ranma. "You ready?" Ranma asked.

Shampoo flipped her Chuis through her fingers, then took a modified Wing Chun stance, thinking through what was about to happen and hoping the change in style would throw Ranma off a bit. Of course, against an opponent like Ranma, plans were not exactly a good idea. Still, Shampoo had a very, very basic one based around her understanding of Ranma's own style. *Charge forward to feint an attack, pull Ranma into her own. Survive her onslaught, wait for an opening, don't even try to keep her grounded, it's impossible out here.*

That was about all the planning she could do frankly, but Shampoo felt that if she could survive that initial rush, her chance of winning would go up. *Not much* she admitted to herself, staring across at Ranma. *Not much at all. But enough and if I win...*

Unfortunately for both Shampoo and Ranma, Genma had woken up that morning, Ranma having forgotten to knock him out once more that morning. This wasn't the first time he'd woken up for a bit, but this time he remained lucid long enough to realize his predicament, i.e. that his ungrateful brat had tied him up. *Bah, but he's made the amateur mistake of tying my hands to the front of my body and together.*

Genma was an escape artist of the first-order and spent several minutes loosening the arms around his paws, before slowly slipping out of them and then untying himself quickly, growling quietly under his breath. Now, out of the cave, he spotted the boy in his weak female form facing the crazy Amazon girl. *Damn it, I was right, the boy's been hoodwinked by her! Damn it. Ah well, at least he's got his old man looking out for him.*

With that, the panda rumbled forward, moving faster than anything its size should have. Coming close to the spar from the periphery Genma then leaped toward them crossing the last few feet almost unseen, paws flailing in either direction just as the two warriors were about to engage.

Ranma's eyes widened as he started to turn that way, but that was the only hint Shampoo had before a blow smashed into her face, hurling her backward knocking her unconscious and breaking her nose in the bargain. The one that hammered into Ranma didn't do as much damage, only causing her to stumble with her head ringing, but then Genma leaped onto her back its feet first, smashing Ranma's head into the ground.

Seeing both youngsters were out like a light, Genma nodded firmly. "Grouf." He stared up at the sky and after a moment's indecision, decided not to try and warm up some water just yet. Who knew how the weather would turn, regardless of how nice it was now.

Hmmf, I'll have to convince the boy that she did something during the match, hopefully he'll still be gullible enough to believe me. And hopefully she won't be chasing us any longer! With that, he ran off, the redhead on her shoulder. *Bah, the things I do for the boy.*

OOOOOOO

Shampoo woke up, groaning, one hand rising to her head, her body half caked in mud, several yards away from the makeshift challenge log that she and Ranma had put together. "What happened?"

She groaned, trying to pull herself out of the muddy ground doing so only with some difficulty. Moving over to the log, she rolled on top of it, grumbling at how muddy her back and butt were.

Then she looked around in confusion, feeling at her face. What, something hit me? W, was Ranma holding back on me?! GRAH!"

A burst of fury went through Shampoo at that, and for a moment, that was the only thing she could think of: That Ranma had just been toying with her, and now that it was a sunny day out, she had put Shampoo down hard. *Just like when we were in my village! Was she trying to get me to share our techniques with her?* Shampoo's teeth clenched angrily, and she pounded one fist down on her thigh.

But the pain of that actually made her think. "Wait, she was still outside of my range, I think." One hand rose to her head once more, touching her forehead and then her neck and nose gingerly, noting the last was broken. "At least I think she was. But then where is she..."

She looked around at the mud a wry, bitter twist coming to her lips. "Still, I'll be able to follow Ranma's tracks quickly at least."

Even as that thought percolated through her mind, Shampoo blinked, staring at the other set of tracks that were there. Panda tracks. "That panda, did it attack me?"

For the next few hours she searched around for Ranma's tracks and didn't find any. *So maybe the panda attacked us both? And carried her off? That would be strange. Maybe they made the plan together and this is just a trick to throw me off the trail even more?*

Shampoo again scratched her head before wincing, then moving on earth hand to her nose, setting it with a howl of pain. "Dammit!"

Whatever happened, Ranma wasn't here any longer, which meant that their match had been either dishonorably ended, or, in terms of their agreement, called on account of outside interference. *Which means Shampoo thought, straightening her shoulders, I still have to chase after Ranma. And if she did have any part in siccing that panda on me, I will kill her just as my laws demand. And if not? I always wanted a panda fur rug.*

With that thought, she made her way to the cave, only to find her pack upended, and much of her cooking utensils and spices taken. "That tears it, no animal would be that smart...although, this one did seem smart enough to be using martial arts," Shampoo groaned, still uncertain what had happened. But thankfully, they hadn't taken her secret supply of medicines, hidden in an inner pocket of her pack. She pulled out a few small bills, popping them into her mouth before leaning against the wall of cave, sliding down onto her rear.

She waited until the pill kicked in, then stood up, gathered her things, and resolutely went outside, wincing only a little now. The sun was high and the weather hot. This is a good day to be on the hunt. Whichever prey I decide to skin.

OOOOOO

Ranma had woken up about an hour before Shampoo and found herself tied up on his father's back, both of them still in their cursed form. Instantly, Ranma began to wiggle, growling out "Damn it Pops! What the Fuck did you do that for? One more match, one more, and I could've gotten Shampoo off our back!"

Between the time Ranma had been knocked out and woken up, the Old Man had once more gathered enough wood and his permanent marker, and now raised a sign in front of his son's face, smacking the sign against it several times before pulling far enough away for Ranma to read what was written there. "Hah! Don't you think it, boy."

The same sign flipped, showing, "That woman was crazy, her entire culture was crazy." Flip to the wrist side once more. "You think she would've let you live just because you beat her again?"

"Hey! Shampoo and I talked and..."

"And she started to use her feminine wiles on you without you even knowing!" Her father interrupted her by smacking Ranma in the forehead with the sign again. "She gave you the Kiss of

Death! A new sign. “And the guide told us that was irreversible!” Flip. “Do you think she would be willing to just say,” flip, “oh that’s nice and then go home without your head?”

Ranma flinched a bit, scowling but not answering. *And it’s kind of true, Shampoo’s er, feminine wiles were kind of getting to me, although I’d swear she wasn’t doing it on purpose.*

A new sign, the writing on this one Boulder, almost somehow conveying a sense of smugness. “That’s what I thought. Trust me, my interrupting the two of you was the best idea.” Flip. “Forget her boy. Were nearly back to civilization anyway.”

“What?”

Ranma felt herself hurled it up into the air, and then came down with her upper body facing forward, and craning her head, Ranma and stared at the city ahead of them. “How long have I been out?”

“No more than four hours,” was the signed reply. “You’re getting soft boy if that little love tap had you unconscious for that long.” Flip. “But it looks like your old man was right, we were close to the nation.”

Grumbling, Ranma allowed her head to dip forward, as taking it against the pandas for covered but still fat side. “All right Pops, you’ve made your point.”

“You just wait, boy,” Genma’s sign read. “We’ll be there in a moment, and I’ll be able to dump us both,” flip, “into some hot springs and then you can break out of those ropes.”

While Ranma agreed with the idea of turning back into her real body, she shifted around in the ropes and was unable to find any purchase. “I don’t know Old Man, unless changing makes the ropes break on themselves, I don’t know if that’s going to happen. In fact, it might be kind of painful.”

“That’s what you get for you and for joining teams with that Shampoo character just,” flip, “so, you can steal all the food. What have I told you about sharing boy?”

“Absolutely nothing!” Ranma barked back, rearing her head back and now headbutting the side of the panda. “Untie me you Old Coot!”

The panda grunted lightly with each hit, but Ranma couldn’t do any real damage, and Genma just ignored her, moving forward.

A moment later, several extremely confused people watched on as a panda carrying a young girl hopped up over a fence containing a small hot spring, landing in the center of the pool.

A loud yowl of pain was heard, and another voice saying, “Suck it up boy, rope burns don’t stay very long anyway,” in Japanese. Needless to say, the confusion was complete, and many of the people in the small town began to race away to find the local police.

Seconds later, Ranma and Genma were on their way, well ahead of any kind of pursuit, as Ranma stared morosely down at his upper arms and lower arms, visible thanks to the shirt she was in being a muscle to her shirt. Both of his arms were covered in rope welts and shook his head with a sigh. "First thing we get to, when we get back to Japan, we look up that rope style martial arts we ran into right before making the trip over."

"Why?" Genma asked, although she didn't did dismiss the idea. This was about martial arts after all.

"I just think we both need some exercise in breaking out of that kind of thing." *And it will help me hogtie you the next time. More knots, much tighter, and make sure his hands aren't tied together.*

Soon, the two of them were near the ocean, a small inlet away from most of the major cities, but still somewhat close to Japan. "Are you sure we have to do this again Old Man?" Ranma asked, gesturing to himself and patting his flat chest with some proprietary concern. "I mean, we've just spent more than a week in our cursed forms. Do you really wanna give up being human again so soon?"

"We don't have any money boy, and besides, you know the authorities here in China don't like us Japanese."

"Yeah," Ranma drawled. "You'd think they'd be able to look past ancient history or something." His father glared at him, but didn't say anything, knowing that as a shot across the bows of a few ultranationalists martial arts masters they had met in their time back in Japan. Genma was more worldly than that but knew those would be fighting words in lots of places. *Although maybe that is what the boy wants. Heh. Good.* "Quit stalling boy, let's get a move on."

About half a day later, Ranma and his father pulled themselves out of the ocean in a small inlet on the side, before Ranma groaned, looking around them then up at the cliffs all around them. "Well, for a place to come to shore this would not be my first choice, but any port in a freaking storm, especially when you were crazy enough to set out to sea without, you know, a ship!"

"Quit whining like a little girl and let's get climbing!" Flip. "We'll make a camp on top. You still have that fish you caught?"

"That and two others," Ranma said, pulling them out of his ki space. Shampoo's explanation had allowed Ranma to re-create it. She still couldn't pawn put much into the ki space, just large enough for the three fish really, but even that was helpful.

"Good." With that, the panda led the way to the cliff, and began to climb up adroitly.

Ranma growled, stood back, then getting a running start leaped upwards, before hopping up the cliff like a demented bouncy ball, flipping herself in the air to performing perfect Triple Lutz before ending with her feet together, and her arms outstretched. "And the crowd goes wild!"

Then she paused, and shouted down "Hey old man, I don't think we'll need to make camp. There're a few signs up here for a hotel. We're on one of their walking trails."

Later that night, Ranma sat finishing his meal. It turned out this place didn't have any kind of martial arts challenge or dojo, that he (Ranma had changed back as fast as humanly possible and scarred several cooks doing so) could challenge for a night's lodging, and the two of them had been forced to work around the hotel for a while to pay for it instead.

Ranma was still eating when his father back. "Get up boy, there's a martial arts tournament near here. Let's go see if we can enter."

Ranma eagerly hopped to his feet, and the two of them left the hotel. Unfortunately, when they arrived, the tournament was closed to new people. Ranma even volunteered to take on any three of the competitors for a spot, figuring that getting some more money for their trip would be a good idea but there were no takers. This was an honest, if somewhat small tournament.

Scowling, Ranma shrugged, then looked around for his Pops, only to find him by the concession stand, which had a sign that made Ranma's eyes go wide: Free food for betting customers.

"Quick question," Ranma asked the ticket seller, "is there a limit to when we can bet to get the free food?"

"Been on the road for a while, have you?" the older man asked, smirking. "I remember my old own days on the road. I'd have eaten my boots if I could find the right sauce."

Ranma laughed, nodding his head, and the older man went on. "Well, you have to place a bet before the second match, or you won't get the food. Beyond that, and so long as you aren't a pig, it's fine."

Ranma frowned, pulled out his money, and asked politely to see a list of the people.

These came complete with pictures, and Ranma frowned looking through them. A few of them looked like people Ranma remembered vaguely from dojos they had visited years past, but one image caught his eye. It was of a woman's face, perhaps his own age or maybe a bit older, brown hair, pouty face, and a few notations about her style: Shiranui Ryu Ninjutsu. *Huh, I don't know that school. But Ninjutsu, huh?*

Ranma frowned thoughtfully, then shrugged. "Anything you can tell me about this Shiranui girl?"

"I'm not going to tell you anymore about any participants, you'll just have to watch the first match and decide for yourself," the older man waving him away and turning to the next customer.

Ranma's went over and slapped his Old Man upside the head, telling him about the need to bet before eating, and the older man scowled, before gesturing Ranma up into the stands. "Let's see how good your eye for spotting true martial artists are, boy."

The next few moments, the two of them sat at the far back of the public space, watching as the contestants came out. They moved down the line of contestants as they formally pledged to honor the rules of the tournament, and to always obey the law of the martial artist. With Ranma and his father dissecting each of them in turn.

When they came to the woman Ranma had noticed before, Ranma's eyes merely bugged out of his head, but he blinked back rapidly, looking away as his father began to develop a nosebleed. "D, damn! She is nearly falling out of that thing. You think that's part of her style?"

"Of course it's part of her style," his father's tone somewhat nasal as he replied, one hand on his nose. "She's a female ninja, seduction is part of the game! The more concentration you're wasting on looking at her bits, the less you have to dodge her fists."

Ranma nodded as that made sense, then asked "So would she be a good bet?"

"To win the tournament? No. You'll note that a few of the others aren't reacting at all to her. I'd estimate one of them will probably be able to win the tournament, that one boy at the far end, for example."

"Huh..." Ranma looked, blinking. "He looks kind of like me, weird. Same kind of hairstyle, outside of the pigtail anyway, same blue eyes... you haven't been you know had another child at some point without telling me, right?"

Genma shook his head, frowning as he too looked at the participant. "No, although you're right, he does look like you. Odd. Although he also looks both older and meaner."

As the two Saotomes watched, the first few matches began, and Ranma's pick, Mai, worked her magic. It was clear the first man she faced a man in his thirties, was too busy staring at her tits. Which, admittedly, Ranma could understand. Mai was at least a size larger, maybe more than Shampoo, and her breasts were a little more... pendulous as a result. *Or maybe that is because she's not wearing a breast band or anything.* Her legs too were on display to a large degree, her small kimono being sliced up to around her hips.

Her thigh and lower legs were both heavily muscled, though, and Ranma was much more impressed by that and the muscles on Mai's arms than the rest of her. *Or, well, just as much anyway,* Ranma admitted to himself, watching as Mai delivered a spinning kick that threatened to show off even more of her legs and maybe her panties too. More importantly, the kick laid out her opponent who collapsed like a sack of wheat.

Ranma grinned as he went over to collect his winnings, nodding to a small elderly man who was doing the same, cackling gleefully. Ranma had gotten five to one odds, the man Mai had faced being one of the favorites to win it all.

Returning to his father, he smiled cheerfully at the old man. "Your turn Pops, or else you're going to have to work off all that food you bought." Genma opened his mouth, but Ranma went on blithely, flashing his teeth in a dangerous smirk. "And if you think that I will pay for your stomach, you've got another think coming. Or do you not trust your ability to see real talent, huh?"

Scoffing Genma heaved himself to his feet, moving in that direction. Soon he was back, and the two Saotomes began to analyze the fights once more. This drew in some of the other watchers, and indeed some of the participants heard them. When he got up to head to the bathroom, Ranma was surprised to hear someone call out to him, "Hey cutey with the pigtail, over here."

Ranma blinked, looking over to the speaker, and found his self-control suddenly under intense pressure as Mai Shiranui stood there a smirk on her dark red lips. "You were the one who analyzed my last fight right? You felt that I was open to grapples?"

"Er, um, yeah. Sorry, er, fighters who use a lot of kicks usually can be taken by surprise if someone goes to grab their legs or arms. You're um..." Ranma stammered to a halt.

"Go on..." Mai smirked, crossing her arms under her chest, pushing her breasts up and out. She was astonished that the young man didn't look away from her eyes. *Wow, that's some good self-control.* Mai knew the reactions she garnered from the opposite sex, heck she'd been trained by her pervert of a grandfather to make use of it. But this guy wasn't getting caught out on it.

Seeing that she listened more intently to his words as he went on. "You're also a bit too flashy. You don't pull back your punches quickly enough. You mix up your attacks, and you're really mobile, but you're um, if a guy can keep his attention on your shoulders, you're kind of easy to read. Sorry."

That made Mai blink in surprise and she shook her head. "Okay, I wasn't expecting that. Really?"

"Yeah, really. Sorry, but I've trained against so many styles, I know the weaknesses that can open you to one type of martial art school or another."

Thinking about it, Mai frowned thoughtfully. "Okay, you're right. I've got a few tricks, mostly based on weapons and hidden surprises, to counter grappling. But my main defense against grappling is well..." Mai gestured down at herself. "The fact if any guy got a hold of me, the last thing he'd be thinking about is beating me in a match or otherwise."

"Er, yeah, I get that, but what if it's a woman? An um, straight woman I mean. Or someone like me or that guy over there with the camo pants? Someone able to control themselves?"

"Oh, you think you would be able to control yourself in that case?"

"Er I think I'd probably be a blushing mess and unable to go through with grappling you, but that's me," Ranma admitted.

Mai giggled at that, but was impressed Ranma kept his eyes locked with her own as he spoke. "Okay, so how would you fight me?"

When Mai asked that, Ranma's face changed, becoming more intense, wilder, a smirk on his face as he answered, "I'd go on the attack. You like to move around and attack your opponent from several angles, but my style's an aerial one. I'd overwhelm you in the air, and that would negate a lot of your kicks or use them against you."

"Ho, you sound plenty confident there?" Mai snorted. "Why didn't you enter the tournament then?"

"We just got back from China early today, and we aren't exactly from around here, so we didn't know about the tournament until tonight," Ranma answered with a shrug.

Mai's brows furrowed her mouth forming a very pretty moue. "Wait, if you just got back from China, why are you here at all? We're more than two hours' drive from the nearest port. Did you come out here for the tournament? I didn't know it was being advertised that openly."

"It ain't. We just happened to come ashore near here."

That statement made Mai have even more questions but she turned away when her name was called. "Okay, well, I'm just going to have to leave this here, I guess. Still, if your ever near Kyushu, look up the Shiranui school. I'd be interested in seeing if your skills back up that mouth of yours."

"Heh, you're on. And good luck yeah? Just remember what I told you and you should be fine." With that, Ranma held out his hand in a fist.

After a second, Mai laughed, and gave him a fist-bump, before moving off to enter the ring, amused again at the level of self-control the pigtailed martial artist had. *It almost reminds me of Andy, but of course Andy's far more handsome, and more driven too. Although I'd be interested to see how Ranma stacks up against the Boggards in the future. Could be fun.*

Ranma took a few minutes just closing his eyes and going through a Buddhist mantra he'd learned at one point about controlling desires before turning away. *What the hell is up lately? First Shampoo now this beauty?*

Once he was certain he wasn't about to pop a stiffy in public, Ranma moved back to his father, finding him being confronted by a strange man with gold rings on his fingers and a garish outfit. Pausing, Ranma slunk into a nearby shadow, grateful that it was getting dark out. From there, he watched what was going on, interested in where this other old guy knew his father. He was not disappointed.

"...Very well Genma, but I want to know where you and Ranma are going to meet up. My sweet Kaori longs to meet her fiancé."

"And I tell you Daikoku, I can't say. We were separated swimming across from China. We've got a few places we could meet up, but we have to get in contact first," Genma answered, looking worried, and indeed quite annoyed.

"You expect me to let you just walk off, again!? Hah. No, Genma. I will just have to go with you to..."

Having heard enough, Ranma decided to get to the bottom of this. He backed away, found a near empty bottle of water, and dumped it over his head, before returning to her father. "Hey, Pops! I got my money from that last bet and placed a new on that Shiranui girl. I think if she listens to my advice, she should win at least two more matches before running into trouble, but then some ass got me with his water bottle."

The stranger blinked, staring at Ranma. "Er, young lady, who are you?"

"Ranko Saotome. And you Mister?" Ranma answered boldly, having thought some of this conversation through as 'he' changed into 'she'.

"I... you didn't say you had a daughter too Genma," Daikoku shook his head in shock, then he laughed. "Thank goodness you take after your mother, young lady!"

"Hah! Yeah, I've heard that before. But how do you know Pops?" Ranma questioned. "I heard you saw something about wanting to meet my brother?"

"Yes, I did! Do you know where he is? Your father told me he lost sight of Ranma when you all were swimming from China. And I must say that is quite a feat! You are to be praised for your dedication to the Art my dear!" Daikoku announced. "As to why I want to meet him, why, your brother is betrothed to my daughter! Just imagining a man able to perform that marrying into my family is enough to make me dance. Hah, and all for the sake of a single meal of fish and pickles."

Ranma did not need to feign shock at that, and she stumbled back, before scowling over at her father, who now looked like he too would desperately like to use his cursed form right now. "What the hell!? This is the first I've heard of this, and if I ain't heard of it, I bet you ain't told Ranma either! What the hell Pops, choosing Ranma's wife without asking!? There better not be any agreements like that for me or I'm gonna introduce your balls to a nutcracker!"

That had Daikoku both wincing and laughing at once, while her father tried hard to control himself, knowing any eruption would possibly give the game away. "I didn't want you... or your brother being distracted while on our training journey. Now that it is coming to an end, we can start to think about that kind of thing. Once we meet up with him."

Ranma rounded on Daikoku. "And what about your daughter, is she okay with being married off like, like a prize mare!?"

That shut Daikoku up, and he was about to answer huffily, when he heard his daughter's name being called. "Hah, well my Kaori is a nice, biddable girl, who's always known what she would be called on to do for our family. Now though you will see what our Martial Arts Catering can do for a martial artist. Your brother will learn a lot and the future of both our styles will be assured."

With that he hopped away, leaving Ranma staring daggers at his old man. "Fish and pickles? Fuckin' really old man!?"

"It was **TWO** pickles and you know what it is like on the road boy, you do what you have to in order to survive," Genma retorted, then gestured to the back of the bleachers. "Now come on, let's get out of here while the getting is good."

"Right. Although we are going to talk about this Pops. I hate it when you make plans without me, and this is a big freaking plan you're trying to make here. I was serious about the nutcracker thing."

Wincing, Genma prayed Ranma would calm down, or else he would have to tie him up and carry him the rest of the way to Nerima. "R, right..."

OOOOOO

Shampoo grimaced as she smacked another wandering hand away from her rear. She had found a pleasure yacht heading to Japan and asked to work for her way across, thinking her cooking skills would be on demand. But no, she had been forced into the waitress position thanks to her looks, and alas, the majority of the people on the yacht belonged to a baseball team. In other words, young, horny men.

Admittedly some of them are handsome but they are so weak! she mused as the man whose hand she had smacked stumbled away, holding his throbbing wrist. *And if anyone tries to mess with my drink again, I am not going to be responsible for my actions. Ugh, as if an Amazon wouldn't recognize when someone adds something to our food.*

Four more sprained wrists and a glaring manager later, Zian Pu headed into the room she shared with several elderly women and her fellow waitresses. They all gave her and the other two waitresses commiserating looks, but Zian Pu ignored them, flopping down into her bed. *I swear to Athena if the captain tries to stiff my wages or something stupid, I am going to kill him.* She twisted onto her back, staring up at the bunk above her. *Ranma because of you I have truly seen hell and I am going to make you pay for it!*

OOOOOOO

Ranma sighed, scowling as he slumped at the Tendo table, depression rolling off him in waves. Normally Ranma wasn't one to let things bother him, but the last few days had just been a huge ordeal after another. First, he'd had his (at the time her) kiss stolen by a Mikado 'I'm too pretty to hate' Sanzenin, who seemed a serial cheater/adulterer in the making with how he liked to break couples up.

Second in the challenge match, not only had Ranma barely learned anything he could use outside a skating rink, but he had also been forced to fight most of it in his female form, with Ryoga as a partner. That had been humiliating, even worse than how long it took Ranma to learn how to skate in the first place.

Then, just as Akane might just, you know, be moving past her anger at her sisters foisting the fiancé thing on her, she somehow decides that Ranma is bullying Ryoga and goes off with him looking for her stupid P-chan. Then, when Akane and Nabiki bring out female Ranma for ice cream, who should show up? Shampoo. By busting through the wall of the ice cream store and attacking out of the blue, no less, shouting her old battle cry of "Ranma, you I kill!" as if their meeting in the cave hadn't happened at all.

I can't believe it, but it looks almost like...like...the old man was right. Gah, I can't even, just thinking that makes me feel sick, he thought, those words sounding a bit more like a whine than Ranma was willing to acknowledge. Even so, he felt his thoughts were right on both counts. *Darn it, Shampoo just attacked me completely out of the blue! I mean, I can understand she's angry, but I thought we had become friends in the cave, or at least near enough she'd give me the benefit of the doubt.*

That actually kind of hurt. Ranma wasn't really close to most people, but he and Shampoo had seemed to get along at the time. Certainly, he had spent more time actually talking to her than he had anyone here in Nerima. *Mind you, most of what we talked about was martial arts, but that's the important stuff anyway, right?* Then he sighed. *Oh, who I am kidding. She didn't see the old man's*

attack, so all Shampoo knows is that she was attacked, so obviously she would blame me, it's supposed owner.

"Well Ranma, are you going to explain what that was about now?" Akane huffed, crossing her arms.

"Yeah, that Shampoo girl was awfully cute~," Nabiki teased, smirking at him. "Not cheating on your fiancée are you?"

Ranma looked at her warily while Akane retorted hotly to that. In the month since he'd arrived, Ranma had quickly learned that Nabiki was a troublemaker. She liked to stir the pot just because she could, and Ranma seemed to have become her favorite tool to use for that kind of thing. But looking at Akane's angry face and Kasumi's inquisitive ones, Ranma knew there was no way he was going to get out of this. *Best to give it to them straight I guess.*

"It ain't like I asked for this either, remember Akane?" Ranma interjected, overriding Akane's building diatribe, smirking over at Nabiki. "As I remember things, it was your sisters who decided to throw you under the bus."

While Akane blinked at that, her forward momentum ruined, Nabiki paled and Kasumi looked away, saying nothing, which was about par for the course as far as Ranma had seen. But he spoke into the silence quickly, wanting that to fester for a bit. *Besides, if I try to say anything now the old men would leap on me.* "Anyway, Shampoo isn't a fiancée or anything. She's a bit more complicated than that, and... I guess at least seventy-five percent my fault."

With that, Ranma gave them all the abbreviated version of what it happened, being very clear that it was his old man's fault for eating the prize food first, just like it was his fault the girls had this whole marriage thing hanging over their heads. "Well, him and your own father anyway. As for what happened in the Amazon's village, *I only joined in after the old man was already pigging out. And how was I supposed to know that the food was supposed to be her prize, none of the others were trying to stop the panda from eating it!"

"So, she gave you this Kiss of Death because she is a sore loser?" Akane scoffed. "Ugh, that sounds so stupid. Just take your loss and learn from it, for goodness' sake."

For a moment, Nabiki and Ranma just stared at her, and then Ranma slumped back in his chair, smacking his head against the table.

"Ranma, my table hasn't done anything to you, so please don't hurt it," Kasumi requested, then looked up as the doorbell rang. "My, guests. I will go see who that is."

Looking up from his slumped position, Ranma looked at the remaining Tendo sisters then over to where the two old men, who had been playing shogi, were also very obviously listening in. His father looked angry at Ranma's attempt to blame him, but not over much, and with a final scowl sent that way, Ranma went on. "So, Shampoo chased us all through China, popping up whenever we stayed too long in one place to try and kill me. Although at one point, I tried to solve things with her, best two out of three. But..."

“Ranma, you have a guest,” Kasumi announced, entering the sitting room once more.

The guest in question caused various reactions. Genma, already in his panda form, froze, while Soun spat out his sake, and Nabiki and Akane both blinked in alarm. Ranma just stared as Shampoo moved around Kasumi, looking around the Tendo’s room with a frown.

For her part, Shampoo was somewhat confused at the moment, mostly by the young woman who answered the door. She wasn’t a warrior for certain, and yet, when Kasumi asked her to leave her shoes behind, and put on slippers, she found herself obeying instantly. That was kind of weird. It was like the young woman, for all that she wasn’t more than a few years older than Shampoo, gave off more mom-vibes than Shampoo’s own mother. It was confusing.

What was even more confusing was that as they entered the room, the mom-girl gestured to a young black haired Japanese boy, saying, “This is Ranma.”

“You Ranma?” Shampoo demanded, cursing inwardly. *Crap! I sound just like Ranma did speaking Chinese. How sad is that?*

Still, he’s kind of handsome she reflected. The black-haired youth had an extremely good build, definitely a martial artist of some kind, and he looked to be a bit taller than Shampoo, which she kind of liked. Decently broad shoulders for his size and age and blue eyes. *Very handsome face too, and not like the pretty boys on so many posters I’ve seen since coming to this weird little island.*

Ranma nodded, and the girl sat beside her, then as Kasumi directed, Shampoo sat down next to him while the older girl moved into the kitchen to prepare some snacks. Then, with a slightly mischievous glint in her eyes, Shampoo thrust out her hand, patting Ranma’s chest and feeling the muscles there.

Of course Shampoo could tell he was a male just by looking, but hey, free touches! “You male. Where female Ranma?”

“I, I don’t know,” Ranma coughed, flushing a bit at the way Shampoo’s hands lingered on his chest and then traveled a bit down, feeling his pecs and abs. “Er, she’s a free spirit you know, comes and goes.”

Shampoo’s eyes narrowed, and she turned away from her fun to point at Akane and then Nabiki. “You with Ranma female. You tell where is.”

At hearing the command and warning in Shampoo’s tone, Akane got her back up at being ordered around. “Now see here, you gaijin! How dare you come to my family’s house and make demands of me! Why the heck would I even help you in the first place!”

While Soun nodded sagely at that and the panda whipped out a sign saying, “Look how quick she is to defend him, it’s destiny I tell you, Tendo. Destiny!” Shampoo’s eyes narrowed, and suddenly, she was holding her Chuis, having pulled them out from her ki space. “You either tell now or tell after beat you.”

“Just try it you!” Akane growled, getting to her feet too.

“H, hey wait, let’s all just calm down!” Ranma tried to diffuse things, surprising the others somewhat. “Besides, female Ranma told me that she and you already had worked things out. Best two out of three...”

Ranma trailed off at the look on Shampoo’s face and when she spoke, her voice contained a lot of anger. “Ranma win first. Shampoo wins second. Third, Ranma send panda on me!”

Over the weeks that had passed since their aborted cease-fire in the cave, Shampoo had become more and more certain of that. After all, why would a panda attack like that, especially one that was so well-trained, unless it had been told to. And how would a panda know to search her pack for her supplies? Especially when the remnants of the sheep carcass was right there? While normally vegetarians, even a panda could not have ignored that and certainly not for anything he could find in her pack.

“Now that isn’t what, er, my sister told me! My old man I mean the panda, he attacked both of you!” Ranma protested. *Should I just tell her about the Jusenkya curse? No, that’d let her make the connection to me and my ‘sister’ being one and the same, and if that happens...* Ranma suppressed a shudder. He really didn’t want to learn what Shampoo could be like if she had the anti-pervert power up all women seemed capable of using when she found out she’d spent so much time undressed around someone who had been born male.

“So female Ranma tell you. All Shampoo know is panda attack, and then I knocked out. I not even see panda doing the attacking before I go out.” Again, Shampoo cursed her inability to speak in a cogent and intellectual manner, but she hoped that her words got across to the buffoon. “And so, Kiss of Death still on. Shampoo must kill, for honors sake.”

She hesitated, seeing the mail Ranma across her his arms angrily, and went on more hesitantly. “Shampoo not like it, but honor still dictating it.”

Akane rolled her eyes, standing up again. “Has it never occurred to you Shampoo, that your clan’s rules really don’t apply to anyone outside of it! God, you sound like you were stuck in the twelfth century or something!”

“Oh,” Shampoo asked coldly. “You not care about family honor?”

Akane spluttered, then shot back, “Not enough to kill someone!”

“Then you no martial artist,” Shampoo answered with a lazy shrug. “Now, you tell me where I find female Ranma or...”

That was as far as she got before Akane charged. If there was one thing Ranma had learned over the past month and a half, it was that despite her lack of skill and true dedication to the Art as he saw it, (he wouldn’t go as far as Shampoo had, but...) Akane hated being called out on the fact that she wasn’t a martial artist. “How dare you, you Chinese hussy! Get out of my house!”

Kasumi's shout of, "Akane, not inside!" from the entrance to the kitchen went unheard, as the youngest Tendo barreled towards.

Instantly Shampoo was on her feet once more and lashed out with a kick, catching Akane in the chin, causing her to stumble back. A bare second later, Shampoo's Chuis appeared in her hands and then was holding her Chuis once more, one of them lashing out to smash into Akane's leg, upending her to the floor. Her other Chui came down in a blow that would undoubtedly have cracked bones at the very least.

Ranma had a moment to note that she was aiming for Akane's stomach instead of head. It would've been a debilitating instead of a killing blow. But he had already moved by the time that percolated through his brain, and he kicked out hard, catching the weapon as it descended, smashing it out of Shampoo's grip to whirl away to be caught by his father's paw.

In the other paw, Genma held up another sign. "Ahah! I knew he cared about her too Tendo!"

"Indeed, my old friend, their chemistry is undeniable," Soun nodded.

Shampoo whirled towards Ranma bringing her other Chui around, but Ranma's hand grabbed it behind the Chui head, grunting at the impact to his palm. *Shampoo is pretty darn strong!* But Ranma was way stronger, and he pulled the weapon out of her grip, kicking out at the same time. She blocked the kick but was still flung backwards out of the open doors to the backyard, where she rolled, coming to a halt. She hopped to her feet, grinning. "Is good! Talk cheap."

In actuality, Shampoo was just fed up with having to think things through in terms of what she felt towards the female Ranma. Her own pride, the confusion about what had happened during the log match, the friendship they had been slowly forming, it was all too much for a young woman who very much preferred to keep things simple. And, she also felt male Ranma was extremely handsome.

Heh, he's certainly a step up from Mousse on two major points: one, he's able to actually see, and two, I don't think of him as a brother. So even if I lose, I win she thought to herself gleefully. *Not that I am going to make it easy for him.*

With that, she darted forward, once more pulling out a weapon from her ki space she dashed towards Ranma with a long spear, the same one Ranma had used in their weapons only match in the cave. The added range of the spear and Shampoo's speed, which she had built on in the month since they'd last fought, gave Ranma a bit of trouble for a few seconds while he was stuck in the doorway. Shampoo also knew that if this Ranma was anything like the female one, she had to keep him grounded, and so didn't fall for any feints, protecting the area above and directly in front of herself.

But despite this, Ranma only needed one slower than normal stab to bounce up and over the thrust, and then Ranma was in the air above Shampoo, moving out into the backyard beyond.

At that point, the battle was no contest. Shampoo was fast, agile and she used her spear well, but Ranma was a master of the aerial style of Anything Goes, and he had the whole sky to go with. Ranma also had a natural longer reach than Shampoo and used that occasionally to his advantage after smashing her spear to pieces.

But Shampoo kept on fighting, until Ranma knocked her out with a blow to the back of the head that sent the Amazon flying. She crashed into the side of a tree, where she slumped down unconscious.

“Well,” Nabiki said stonily staring at some of the damage done to the patio and the doorway, “I...”

“I hope you’re happy Akane,” Ranma interrupted, scowling at both sisters as he gently laid Shampoo out next to Kasumi, who quickly placed a cold pad on her head. He wasn’t in the mood for Nabiki’s troublemaking. “We were actually trying to talk her down and seemed to be getting somewhere until you got all annoyed at her.”

“What did you expect Ranma?” Akane shouted back, pointing at the girl. *Is it just me, or is Ranma showing her far too much sympathy for someone who wants to kill his female form!?* “She insulted my honor is a martial artist.”

Ranma ground his teeth, and he was about to open his mouth, but then, his father came over, dumping a bottle of tea over himself, and growling angrily at him. “She’s right boy! Indeed, you should’ve been the first one to stand up and defend your fiancée’s honor! You stepped forward when the threat became physical but even so...”

“Hey!” Akane shouted, “I don’t need anyone to defend me!”

Ranma ignored that, glaring up at his old man, giving him the finger. “And whose fault do you think this is, huh?! If you hadn’t interrupted, I would’ve beaten her back at the cave. Shampoo would’ve been satisfied that I was better than her, but also honorable, and we could’ve...”

“Are you listening to yourself boy? That Amazon gave you the Kiss of Death in the first place because she was a sore loser! This is the same arguments we had at the time, and nothing’s changed except that she’s proven to be willing to kill you again!” Genma barked back.

“Then why was she willing to talk to us today instead of threaten you all?” Kasumi asked softly, smiling serenely. Instantly the shouting in the room and did, as all of them shuffled looking a little nervous at the woman’s feints mile. “For my part, I believe that Shampoo is a very conflicted young lady. She showed no true desire to kill Ranma as her honor dictates, but rather resigned anger at it. I agree with Ranma, she might’ve been able to get out of it, except for your outside interference, Uncle Saotome.”

“And I disagree,” Genma answered back, shaking his head like a bull that had just taken a hit between the eyes. “Besides, she attacked your sister.”

Kasumi coughed, looking over at her sister, who crossed her arms and glaring angrily at Ranma for some reason. “Yes well, I have mentioned that Akane’s a nice girl, she’s just a bit of a violent maniac at times. I’m certain an apology will...”

“I’m never going to apologize to her! How can you even ask me that Kasumi!?” Mount Akane flared up once more. “You heard what Shampoo said, she thinks I’m not a martial artist just because I don’t think my honor matters more than the law!”

Again, Ranma had to bite his lip to keep from saying anything. *It would be singularly unhelpful to say any of the many things I've been thinking about her and the whole Tendo school* Thankfully, Shampoo groaning provided instruction. Ranma looked down at her and Kasumi smiled, reaching down and removing the cloth from Shampoo's head if she was all right.

For a moment, Shampoo had been back in her village, having just been thoroughly trashed by her grandmother for acting like a brat. It happened often enough, but eventually, the message, whatever it was that month, stuck. But Kasumi's voice brought her back to the here and now, and it was all Shampoo could do to not to squeal happily as she remembered what had happened. **Yes!**

The male Ranma had been good, just as good or perhaps a little better than his sister. Not only had Shampoo fought as hard as she could, but Ranma had defeated her cleanly, and there was only one response and Amazon woman could do such as that. She sat up, nodded thanks to Kasumi, and then looked to her side, where Ranma was sitting.

"You're not going to give me the Kiss of Death or anything are you," Ranma asked, although for some reason he could feel his heart beginning to pound. *I mean, all I was doing was defending, it wasn't like that was a proper martial arts match or anything.*

"No. Shampoo not give you Kiss of Death..." Shampoo purred.

Somehow, the way she spoke sent a shiver of something up and down Ranma's spine. Fear? Anticipation? Something, and he found himself rooted to the spot as Shampoo moved closer. Before anyone else could say anything, Shampoo leaned forward and kissed Ranma on the lips. It was awkward, and somewhat twisted her body around the bed, but Shampoo still did it. She held the kiss for a second and Ranma found male instincts he didn't even know existed responding, pushing him to lean forward just a bit to press his own lips slightly against hers.

Then as shouted of shock and outrage began, Shampoo pulled back, saying in Chinese, "I love you, beloved."

While everyone around them started to shout or blame Ranma for whatever was happening, heck, even Kasumi was shouting, "Oh my," Ranma stayed silent, staring at Shampoo before turning his attention to the others as Shampoo smirked slightly and turned her attention to the cup of tea on the table nearby. Ranma continued to shout ignorance or just bellow back insults at his father and Soun, then, when everyone understood he didn't know what the heck this was about either, turned back to Shampoo.

But instead of anger or annoyance or any of a myriad other emotions Ranma was feeling, when he turned back to Shampoo, all she saw was curiosity and surprise. "Explanation please?" he asked in Chinese.

Shampoo smiled at that, grateful he was taking this so well so far. He hadn't returned her kiss as much as she would have liked but Shampoo felt she could put that down to the fact that it had been so sudden, and they were after all in public. Still, the laws were clear. The Kiss of Death could not just be given whenever, it had to be given at the first moment when the Amazon in question could do so.

"Is simple. If outsider female beat Amazon, must kill." She hesitated, then shrugged. "That law anyway. Hopefully more... like, like cloth than wood."

"Oh, you mean more flexible in practice? Not so rigid?" Kasumi supplied, understanding Shampoo's pidgin Japanese was not up to the task just now.

"Yes that!" Shampoo answered, bowing towards the older woman gratefully. "But if outsider male defeat Amazon, needs must give Kiss of Marriage. "

Ranma's face paled, and he waved his hands wildly. "Wait, wait! Do you mean we're married!? Just because you kissed me!?" *She cute and that kiss was... well it was um, wow, but that's waaay too far, especially with all the way my old man's sold my hand a few times as it is.*

Shampoo shook her head. "No. Shampoo not know word in Japanese, but it about stuff before. It promise to try to marry..." she attempted to say.

Once more Kasumi came to her help. "I think it is the equivalent of a promise ring, perhaps? You want to date and see if you are compatible?"

"Yes!" Shampoo latched onto the one word she knew, date, in that sentence. "Date! Yes. Lots of that. In old time, would marry quick. These days, not."

"You wouldn't happen to have a booklet about your people's laws, would you?" Nabiki interjected, smirking slightly as her sister turned redder, and Ranma deflated quickly, as if not married so quickly was his primary concern. Not that another woman, cuter and curvier than Akane, was now after him. "And you don't seem all that disappointed Ranma?" she taunted.

Ranma gaped at her, waving his hands wildly. "Hey! Don't put this on me, I..."

"You didn't push her away," Akane answered sharply, turning on him like a terrier looking for her favorite bone. "It almost looked like you were enjoying it!"

That of course, brought Ranma's automatic defenses to bear. "Well, maybe if someone else I could name wasn't such an un-cute flat-chested tomboy I..."

That was as far as he got before the table was lifted up and smashed into his head, hurling Ranma and the pieces of the table out of the still open doorway to the backyard.

"Oh my, I do wish he could keep a control of his tongue more," Kasumi murmured, staring after her table.

Shampoo glared at the one called Akane, cracking her knuckles explosively. "You attack Ranma again like that, around Shampoo, Shampoo not hold back!"

Akane scoffed, and turned, stomping off, and the two old men began a familiar moaning refrain, moving over to the nearby wine cellar. This left Nabiki and Kasumi to clean up was not lost on either Tendo sister and they both sighed before getting to work.

OOOOOOO

Later that night, Ranma sighed, leaning back against the top of the chimney on the Tendo's roof, scowling in annoyance. He had quickly found that this was a nice quiet place where no one else would come and bother him. And right now, he really needed to think about it things. Shampoo, Nerima, Shampoo's kiss, the Tendos, Shampoo and whether or not she'd kill him, his old man and the future.

Setting aside his thoughts on Shampoo as being a bit too jumbled right now, Ranma decided to first think about Nerima and the Tendos.

That fight with Kuno was kind of interesting, and the fights against the other local martial arts styles have also been kind of cool, pushing me to adapt. Yet without me being surprised by those pictures coming out of his pocket, Kuno would have been no threat, and take their skates off and the comedy team of Pretty Boy and Klepto wouldn't be much either. That's sort of a theme around here, their basic skills are all just okay, but the martial artists take normal judo or Aikido and adapt them to an insane level for their specialties. It's... fun... and keeping me on my toes, but I don't see any of them really able to make me sweat outside of Ryoga and his whole disappearing act's too annoying to plan for.

And the Old Man's making me go to school, Ranma snorted, shaking his head. While seeing that science teacher run away screaming about how 'the laws don't matter, why don't they matter' was kind of funny, it's a major drag. Mostly because of Kuno and Akane.

That thought segued into the next easily and Ranma sighed, staring up at the stars, trying to take some solace in them as always. *I got to say, the so-called home life is something else. Nerima might be a fun place to visit but I'm thinking now it ain't so nice a place to live. And at the heart of that is Akane and the rest of the Tendos.*

First, the problem with the Weepy Man. He was just like Ranma's father, manipulative, only more in an emotional manipulation kind of way, rather than an ego and pride kind of way. But Ranma knew their tricks by this point. *And my willingness to care about either of their opinions, is in the basement and ain't gonna change. Screw 'em.*

Then, there was Kasumi. Ranma liked her, but she was such a wallflower! *Come on girl, stand up for what you think or are yourself at some point, please!* The only times Kasumi ever even raised her voice was when someone tried to make trouble at meal times, or wreck the house. Worse, Kasumi was older than Ranma and had made no bones about the fact that she saw Ranma as a guest, nothing more nothing less. Kasumi wasn't a problem but she wasn't a solution either.

No, the two major problems in the house are Nabiki, and Akane. Mind you, that's like comparing a handgun to a cannon, but they're both the same kind of thing. Nabiki made Ranma uncomfortable, her manipulative ways, and the way she had routinely taken pictures of both Ranma's female form and her sister pointed to the fact that this was not someone Ranma wanted to be around. To say nothing about how she always seemed to egg either Ranma or Akane on to make their fights or arguments bigger.

And then we come to Akane. After a month living with her, Ranma had decided he could barely stand the girl. She was just so inconsistent. *One day she's nice, the next she's trying to tear my head off.*

One day she's being friendly, the next second she thinks I'm picking on Ryoga. And would it kill her to call me something beyond pervert!?

Worse was the way she treated the Art. Yes, Akane was the only one of the three sisters who seems to practice some form of martial arts. *But that is just it, she practiced, she didn't live it! She didn't look to the future and say this is what I want to do! Hell, she treats the martial arts as just a way to keep herself fit most of the time.*

Heck, the one time they'd had a candid discussion about what their parents wanted them to do, Akane had seemed horrified at the idea of either joining Ranma in teaching – which Ranma had no interest in- or looking after the house being stuck there while Ranma taught martial arts... That wasn't something Akane wanted.

And yet, just like today if anyone questioned her devotion to the martial arts, she blew up at them. She had no self-control, and routinely attacked Ranma, not just verbally but physically, which he was beginning to really dislike. Especially when compared to how he and Shampoo had talked and got into know one another for that time in the cave while still also planning to fight.

She and I were willing to put aside all the reasons to be unfriendly and got to know one another. And here Akane and I were without any reason to dislike one another but we are like furry demons and dogs. Worse is I'm the one supposed to change what I'm doing, what I'm supposed to be doing and she ain't willing to do the same or even listen to me most of the time. I know what a real friend is like and it ain't Akane.

That wasn't even mentioning the whole marriage shite. Ranma hadn't taken it seriously since he knew his old man had sold his hand off at least once before this and knowing Genma that was probably only the tip of the iceberg. So to Ranma's mind, there was no real honor agreement here.

It didn't matter which agreement was first, as his old man always stressed. All that mattered was that Genma had dragged their family name through the mud each time he'd made agreements he'd never intended to honor. So really, it was best for everyone that none of the agreements were honored or else the family they were marrying in would also lose honor too.

Hell, I don't even know why Pops and Weepy... hehe, sounds like a comic team. Ooh, even better, Greedy and Weepy. Ranma spent a few seconds snickering at that before becoming serious as he looked out over at the dojo. Anyway, I don't know why they want to bring the two schools together so soon. It ain't like Soun has shown anything that tells me he's even developed a style at all. All Akane does is break bricks and throw simple punches and kicks. Ugh.

And as for Akane and how she and I have been dealing with this whole uniting the schools thing? A freaking train wreck is what it is. Maybe if Akane had been as nice as she'd seemed for the very short time she had known Ranma before the curse came to light, maybe things would be different. If she was less hostile maybe. And if I actually was, um, well at all attracted to her I'd be willing to put up with... eh, who am I kiddin', if she had the same body type as her sisters, I still wouldn't be willing to deal with her shit.

And beyond not liking the whole Tendo homelife thing, Ranma was also getting bored with staying in one place. While his father had instilled in him a love of the martial arts, that wasn't the only thing he had done. Because of their constantly moving on, Ranma had learned to love travelling. He loved to see new places. He loved to learn new techniques and finding and challenging new people. Here in Nerima, while he wasn't bored outside of school hours, he also wasn't really getting better per se. Learning more styles was okay, but outside of further stretching his ability to adapt, that didn't help him get any better, really. The majority of the local styles were just too specialized.

I need more real fights, more fights that push me and are dangerous, instead of just, just about honor, pride and girls. I'm all for those things, but come on, three fights in a month that got my blood pumping, and again, take their skates away, and the terrible twosome are no darn threat! Ugh. Maybe if Ryoga was a regular but...

Ranma looked up at a noise, and blinked when Shampoo landed lightly on the rooftop, so lightly he could barely hear anything. She looked at him, smiling tentatively, and Ranma smiled back just as tentatively, patting the rooftop next to him. She had left earlier when he was unconscious, either asked to leave or simply run off by the old men, Ranma didn't know.

When Shampoo made to cross the distance into his personal space, Ranma held up a hand, looking very nervous. But there were sooo many ways this could go wrong, Ranma knew he had to head off at least a few of them. "We, we should talk a bit, I think."

Shampoo frowned, then shrugged, and sat cross-legged facing Ranma. The serious way in which she'd taken that statement made Ranma also serious, and he sat up, twisting around into the lotus position as he looked back at her. "Er... so... um, did you see my old man transform earlier?" he asked, hoping to start on that.

"Man with glasses and bald head? He no do anything but shout. He your father? Ouch." Shampoo giggled lightly, shaking her head and continuing in her pidgin Japanese. "And Shampoo think Uncle Bowl-cut bad."

Ranma groaned. *Okay, there goes the easiest way of saying this. Time to pull off the Band-Aid, I think.* "So, I, I need to apologize. My Pops, he um... he has a curse. You see, we, um, we went to Jusenkyo er...b, before going through your village."

At first Shampoo didn't understand why Ranma was talking about things as if Ranma had been there instead of his sister, but the instant Jusenkyo was mentioned she got it. Whatever else, Shampoo was not stupid and knew that if both the older Saotome and the younger were at Jusenkyo, that could only mean one thing. *The panda is the older man, ugh and...* Remembering certain events in the cave, Shampoo's eyes narrowed and she stood up, cracking her knuckles, and glaring down at the still seated Ranma in anger. "Which form original?" she hissed.

"This one..." Ranma quickly pointed at himself. "M, my female form I got it the cursed Springs. I, I'm sorry I..."

Instantly Shampoo thumped Ranma on the shoulder as hard as she could. Ranma made no move to move, and she hit him twice more on other parts of his arm, muttering "That for looking at me in cave."

"Fair enough," Ranma nodded wincing slightly. Shampoo was strong. Not as strong as Ranma and Ryoga but certainly up there with the other martial artists he'd fought recently. "Er, so you know, Pops was the one who interrupted our match. I'm sorry but..."

"I okay with that now," Shampoo answered with a smile. "If kisses given to same person, it on me choose which one to follow." She then seemed to wilt a bit, looking almost vulnerable as she locked gazes with Ranma, her face visible thanks to the lights of the area around them. "Question is, what you think of me."

Ranma thought about that for a moment, then answered hesitantly. "I think you're really strong, you're a great martial artist, you are a pretty good conversationalist, er talker," he added, when he looked saw Shampoo's confused expression. "And I liked it."

"Not just looking?" Shampoo questioned, now switching to a more biting yet vulnerable tone.

Ranma scratched at his pigtail sheepishly, then assayed an attempt at a compliment and a bit more truth. "Er, no, that, that was nice, but talking with ya for hours on end was even better. And er, I felt really guilty about it afterward, especially given the trouble I've run into with my curse form since."

That cheered Shampoo up and she nodded. "Is good then. But what problems Ranma run into?"

"Heh, well, in terms o' danger, there is this crazy brother sister pair around here called the Kunos, Tatewaki and Kodachi. Who er...seem to have formed love hate relationships with my different forms." Shampoo looked blank at that and Ranma explained. "Um, Kuno he and I were fighting, I er, fell into a pool at school, and he saw my female form. He's got a thing for strong martial artist types, he was after Akane before I got here and..."

Shampoo scoffed, interrupting. "Bah! If Angry Girl strong, this area too too pathetic."

"Hahaha, yeah, I kinda agree with ya, but if you see a tall guy around our age wearing a kendo outfit and sounding like he's trying to decide if he's a Brit or a Samurai with every sentence, run. If ya beat him ya might end up having him chase you down to. He seems to take a beating like no one I've ever seen and keeps on coming back for more. I think he might actually enjoy it."

"Shampoo once met British person. His English very proper and intelligent. Ranma now ruin it for me," Shampoo mock pouted. "Still, sounds like he more blind than Mousse if not see curse and believe you foul anything. He dangerous?"

"Ehh, not really? He's got this cool air pressure attack, but so long as you know he has it it's easy enough to dodge." Ranma watched as Shampoo perked up at that news, and began to ask him questions, ending with her on her feet and taking a stance he had described from the match Ranma had with Kuno, a Chinese sword in her hand as she mimed the move, humming thoughtfully.

The sight had him smiling and he continued to do so as she turned back to him. "Shampoo find funny Angry Girl sister sell pictures. Is very very mercenary act, yes? But Also funny Kuno obsessed one form, hate other."

Ranma sighed and shook his head. "Er not quite. She hates my female form and loves my male body."

This had Shampoo giggling, which increased as Ranma explained about the whole Martial Arts Gymnastics adventure. The fact Akane had hurt herself in such a silly manner and that Ranma had to fight in her place tickled Shampoo's funny bone. "Shampoo bet you too too cute in leotard," she teased.

Realizing the other girl was just teasing instead of taunting and having to erase an image of Shampoo in a similar outfit, Ranma laughed too. "Heh, I will have you know I was gorgeous."

"Short as curse form is, better cute as button than gorgeous," Shampoo retorted. "Why you so short anyway?"

Snorting Ranma waved one hand airily. "How am I supposed to know? Isn't that the body of the woman who fell into the cursed spring?"

Shampoo shook her head. "No, curse change victim to curse version of self, not original. That what Great Grandmother say anyway."

"Huh. So this is what I'd look like if I was born a girl? Guess that Dai-whatever guy might've been right, in that form I take after my mom, whoever she was," Ranma mused, then shook his head, noticing that Shampoo had sat down again and now the two of them were so close their feet were touching as they sat facing one another. "Well, anyway, the match was kind of interesting. I learned a lot about hidden weapons, a few new throws, and some ribbon combat I think could be useful. But overall, take the special rules and the homefield..."

HE stopped there as Shampoo made a little interrogative noise and Ranma realized he had to explain that, going into detail about how Kodachi had the whole match rigged against Ranma. "Didn't help her thought. And she's a sore loser, so she comes back later that night, and declares that she's given up her old love of male Ranma but made an entirely new one."

That caused Shampoo a case of the giggles again, and Ranma smiled hearing it. He didn't really have the words to explain why he liked the sound but hearing Shampoo giggle was a lot better than hearing other people laugh or have fun at his expense. It was like Shampoo was both commiserating and having fun listening rather than just laughing at Ranma's misfortunes.

Shampoo caught the smile on Ranma's face and for some reason began to blush, falling silent, which in turn caused Ranma to blush and look away. For a moment the two of them just sat there, staring around them rather than at one another, until eventually Ranma had his face under control once more. "Er, anyway, um, back to us, I guess. We can talk about Ryoga later. Er... listen..." Ranma paused once more, then decided again to go with bluntness without being insulting. It had worked so far, after all. "Look while I'm happy that you're not going to try and kill me any longer, I don't want to go back to your village."

At that, Shampoo's eyes narrowed, and her face closed down dangerously, but Ranma held up his hand and explained, "It isn't anything here holding me back, whatever ya might've heard. I mean our family is kind of pushing me and Akane together, but neither of us want. Plus, my old man is so dishonorable, whatever he says about family honor I take with a lot of salt you know? So it ain't that."

Ranma had spoken too fast for a moment there, and had to slow down and explain things better but, Shampoo eventually understood and calmed down. "Okay, is understood. But then why you not come with Shampoo?"

"What about you?" Ranma asked in turn. "Do you really want to go back to your little bit of China? Because I gotta say, I thought I saw a lot more interest in my tales about traveling and stuff than that."

A part of Shampoo wanted to say yes. but she didn't, not really. "Shampoo miss mom, miss dad. Never been away from them before. But bigger part..." Shampoo hummed thoughtfully, turning slightly away from Ranma and then laying out on the rooftop, looking up at the stars for several silent moments before continuing. "Bigger part say want to explore. World way bigger than just the village. What see more of it. Want see more graphic novels and books!" she added excitedly, turning on her side to look at Ranma, her smile widening into an almost childish grin.

Ranma laid back too, turning on his side as Shampoo had, so they were looking at one another, but laying down face to face instead of sitting up, about an arm's length between them. "So, er, I'm not ready to you know marry you or anything like that. But... I... well, I want to leave here. I want to get away from my Pops, I've wanted that for a while. The Tendos ain't exactly my favorite people either, and for all the bizarre challenges and such, I'm not being challenged as much as I could be here."

"Shampoo understand that. Shampoo need challenge Blooded Warriors get challenge at home. If beat them, they not take good, and Shampoo not learning much any longer anyway. But what Ranma saying to Shampoo?" Shampoo questioned hesitantly, wondering why Ranma was mentioning leaving. *Ranma knows I would just have to follow him if he did, so is he telling me this so that I know, or...*

"Well maybe we could travel together?" Ranma asked hesitantly. "Get to know one another learn more martial arts, find new fights together, see the world. I'd say we should head back to China and your area first, but since you also want ta see the world, I can look around for cures elsewhere first, you know? It's important but getting out of here and getting stronger is more important, at least for me."

Her hopeful guess having proven right, Shampoo had started to nod at the first, and she kept on nodding as Ranma added more reasons, although the nods slowed as he mentioned finding a cure for the curse, holding back a wince. *Oh dear, I think Grandmother once mentioned that the curses of the springs don't cancel one another out, they merge....*

But that was a conversation for another day, and Shampoo smiled in affirmation. "Shampoo like all that! When Amazon leave town, she supposed to search out new martial arts styles anyway...But..."

As she spoke, she leaned forward, getting into Ranma's personal space using her arms to perch above him looking down at Ranma's who's face flashed red at her closeness. But to her delight, Ranma made no move to escape, just staring back at her like a deer caught in the headlights.

Now, to find if he is a good man instead of just a good martial artist she thought, a surge of worry going through her for just a moment. Then the memory of Mousse, and how few choices she would soon have there rose in her mind, spurring Shampoo forward and she leaned forward staring into Ranma's eyes.

"But date and getting to know one another just as important as get stronger. Me want know you better. See if, if make it mistake again," she ended hesitantly, pulling back.

Ranma slowly sat up again too, noticing how close they were now, but, oddly, feeling no panic at the idea, only a bit of confusion and a curious amount of interest in what this meant. "I, I don't know what you mean."

"Shampoo kiss female Ranma out of pride, not really want to kill. But law is law. Shampoo jump at chance kiss handsome man, but not know you. Know you little," she went on quickly when Ranma opened up his mouth, "but only as good talker. Not as..." she stumbled to a halt, once again reaching the limit of her ability to communicate in Japanese.

"You, you want to know if I'm a good person?" Ranma guessed, then hesitated. "I, I don't know if I am. I mean, I tricked ya, right? And um, all that stuff in your village, and even a lot of the stuff I've done before that. I ain't exactly above tricking my opponents when I can in martial arts matches or out of them, to say nothin' of... well, I know I ain't perfect."

Shampoo waved that off. "You good martial artist. And you let Shampoo smack you for you peeking in cave. That start. But need know more. Need know if, if can fall in love," she finished, flushing in embarrassment. "Need to know if you good man, good partner."

"Shampoo," Ranma began hesitantly, "I, I mean if we're traveling together, maybe, maybe that could happen. But how do you think you could tell if I'm a good man right now?"

"You kiss me back slightly before," Shampoo blushed, almost stammering alongside of her normal pidgin Japanese. "Kiss again then both know if maybe us make sense, yes?"

"Then we'll both know," Ranma repeated, a blush suffusing his features but he remembered how soft her lips had felt, how soft Shampoo felt, like silk wrapped around steel. And after a few seconds, he slowly nodded.

Internally leaping about in joy, Shampoo smiled, bit her lip, then slowly leaned in, pausing halfway. Ranma watched her come, his eyes locked on her face, watching as Shampoo's eyes slid closed, watching her lips, how wet they seemed, how desirable. Then he leaned forward, matching her.

Sweet heat, sweet touch, **softness**. Shampoo's smell, soap and lavender and some kind of honeysuckle maybe, invaded Ranma's senses, as her soft lips, the softest things Ranma had ever felt pressed against his. And instinctively he pressed back, his arms going around the purple-haired girl.

For a moment, hovering there Shampoo had despaired. That Ranma would call this off, that if they went through with his plan, it would be only as friends, that she had again made a mistake and would eventually have to answer for her hasty nature and pride.

But then, he began kissing back, and now his arms were around her. They weren't clinging, they weren't squeezing, no. Shampoo moaned as those arms, stronger than hers by a wide margin, held Shampoo as if she was the most precious thing in the world, a treasure Ranma wanted to hold, but not make control.

She whimpered as one hand went to the small of her back, the other arm around her shoulders. Returning the gesture, Shampoo pressing her chest into she Ranma, feeling his muscles, as he felt her large breasts slowly flattening between them slightly.

Ranma made no effort to deepen the kiss, just keeping up the same slow pressure, shifting his head slightly to either side as Shampoo did the same, and then leaned back, smiling at her. Shampoo smiled back brightly, leaning her forehead against Ranma's as they both breathed in deeply. "Shampoo now know make no mistake."

Ranma slowly nodded, then leaned in quickly, kissing her again to her delight. This one was shorter, but both of them were now breathing in hard, and Ranma's smile turned just a tad crooked. "Yeah, I, I don't think I'm making a mistake either."

Then an unexpected voice interrupted the moment from the side. "Ranma, are you still up here, get inside you idiot, we have school to... w, what the hell is going on up here!" Akane stammered to a halt seeing the two of them embracing, and then she shrieked. "You fucking pervert! On our roof!!! Well, if your so-called honor doesn't matter to you, then this whole fiancé relationship never happened!"

From somewhere Akane pulled a hammer, hurling it towards Ranma and then leaping back down the ladder she'd used to get to the roof. She didn't see Ranma and Shampoo separate, rolling in different directions to avoid the hammer. The hammer slammed down into the roof, leaving a dent there before disappearing.

"Huh, ki weapon, neat," Shampoo deadpanned.

"Yeah, but if you need to get that angry and out of control to use one, I don't think it's worth it," Ranma answered, as shouts and bellows began below, a plan percolating through his mind. "Hey, let me handle this, okay?"

Before Shampoo could reply, the two drunkards barreled up and out onto the rooftop where they began to berate Ranma. to one side Shampoo glared at them, cracking her knuckles, but Ranma waved his hands waving as if nothing had happened, although he sent Shampoo a wink before he began to speak. "I don't know what she was on about! Shampoo was here to try and find out more about female Ranma, I tried to stop her from starting a fight, Shampoo tripped, I caught her, that's it!"

"Hah that's a likely story," Nabiki murmured, smirking slightly as she poured oil onto the fire. "Akane might have been seeing things, sure, but after this afternoon the evidence suggests otherwise."

“Aiyah, male Ranma tell true,” Shampoo agreed hesitantly, taking heart in that wink and the simply amazing kiss they’d just had. “Mad girl just overact. I go now. Find female Ranma. Still must deal first her.” She nodded at Ranma and said, “Talk about date after, yes?”

“GRAAAH, more talk about that fool foreign foolishness!” Genma grumbled, scowling at his son, as Shampoo disappeared into the night over the rooftops before Ranma could reply. “You should be down and apologizing to your fiancée for this afternoon anyway not up here lollygagging where this foreign hussy can find you!”

Soun nodded his head sagely, scowling at Ranma as he stroked his mustache thoughtfully. “I agree. Perhaps, the two of you should move out. If you are going to abuse my hospitality like this, I don’t think I want you here for now.”

And that way, he and Akane can have some time to cool off before Ranma apologizes. And a few days spent living out on his own will force Ranma to realize how good he has it living here with my family. Besides, it’s not as if he’s just going to run off without his father. How could he survive?

But to his surprise, while Genma looked appalled, Ranma took it with aplomb. Indeed, inside, he was jumping for joy. “Eh, if you’re sure, Mr. Tendo. I can kinda see your point.” He glared at his father for a second. “After all, who know what other trouble might come looking for me or my old man. I’ll be gone in a few minutes.”

“N, now wait a minute!” his father began to protest, but Ranma leaped up off of the rooftop and down, where he nodded at Kasumi, who looked a little pained. But he ignored her. She’d had a month and a half to try and be something more to him than just a random piece of furniture in the house. She hadn’t and that was that.

Moments later, Ranma had his pack, and while his father was still protesting, he leaped out. Ranma shouted “I’ll see you at the school, old man. Or you can stay here for the night, I’ll just spend the night there.”

About fifteen minutes later, Ranma twisted around, not heading for Furinkan, but the nearest park. There, Ranma ignored the sight of a small, abandoned tent, looking around hopefully. That hope was rewarded when Shampoo came out of the trees, leaping down towards him. Ranma grinned, caught her, and the two shared another short kiss. When they pulled back, Shampoo asked, “So, this when we run, yes?”

Ranma smiled, no, he beamed at the Chinese girl, pushing back a desire to kiss her again. *Nope, my hormones don’t control me... not that much anyway.* “Yep. Hope you’re rested Shampoo, because I want to put a few districts between me and the old man before we do anything else.”

Shampoo giggled, having seen Ranma’s eyes trace down to her lips, but also willing to put off more fun in that direction for now in order to get away from the numerous distractions that might get in her way if they stayed here. “Aiyah, sound like fun. Ranma lead the way, yes?”

With a nod, Ranma turned, and with Shampoo beside him, raced off, away from Nerima and the craziness there, determined to find some craziness of his own, the kind that would make him a better martial artist. *And this time with a far better companion too! This could be a lot of fun...*

End Chapter

Chapter 2: Constructing a Relationship

With it being so late, Ranma knew that the trains, the fastest means of putting some real distance between them and Nerima wasn't possible just yet. However that was fine. First, Ranma wanted the two of them to move completely unseen and that was tougher in an urban environment than a forest. *Leaving tracks isn't so much of an issue except...*

Pausing in his jumping from one roof to another, he held up a hand to Shampoo, halting her in turn. "Hey, Shampoo, this might sound weird but are you wearing perfume?"

"It do sound weird, but Shampoo wearing perfume," Shampoo said with a chuckle. "I am woman, yes? Maybe Ranma want another example?"

Ranma blushed at the flirting, and Shampoo's smile turned into a giggle, shaking her head. "Why Ranma ask?"

"Because my old man can turn into a panda remember? He's got a pretty good sense of smell. Every time I tried to turn back to head to the cursed springs and try to find a cure, he'd always sniff me out, and convince me to stop or just knock me out and start heading back towards Japan," Ranma answered. "And I really, really don't want him or any of the others to be able to find us."

Shampoo cocked her head. "Sound like Angry One willing give you up. You certain they all come after you?"

"Yeah, although if you ask me, the reason's really stupid. I told you about how the whole fiancée thing was because we're supposed to be uniting the schools. But we're only one generation thing from the original school of Anything Goes, so there isn't all that much to unite. But my old man and Soun are really interested in it."

"Does sound strange when Ranma put like that," Shampoo mused, even as she fished out a perfume bottle from her ki space. Ranma watched her do it and resolved to talk about the ki space thing with her later. He'd figured it out but he could only make a tiny space, and he refused to think that Shampoo had more ki than him not with everything he knew about how one created ki in the first place.

He took the bottle, and sniffed at it, his eyebrow rising. It was an extremely subtle scent, wild honeysuckle and a hint of something else. "Mmm... nice," he murmured, and blinked as Shampoo blushed, visible in the lights of a nearby apartment tower. "Er, I mean, um... yeah, I

got nothing.” Ranma looked away with his own flushed face. “It, it smells nice, and um I don’t think my old man will have been able to pick it out in the park where we met. We should be good, but if they track us, we might want to change it up.”

“If Ranma so certain Fat Fool come after us, might want lay down false trail,” Shampoo added her own idea. “Head to other side of Honshu, yes. Then head out to sea, double back?”

Ranma agreed with that and buoyed by Shampoo’s words continued to think ahead in a way he had rarely bothered to before. But something about this, running away from the Tendos and his old man, with Shampoo by his side, was really making him want it to work, and if that meant thinking ahead. he could do that. “And we’ll need to think about money...”

“What Ranma have in mind?” Shampoo asked, before scowling. “Shampoo also want learn more Japanese, speak better, yes?”

“Yeah, we can work on that. How did you start learning it anyway?” Ranma questioned.

Moving unseen through Tokyo, the two of them continued to talk, until they were out of the district and into the next one over, heading toward the city center. When Shampoo noticed, she asked why, and Ranma snickered. “I’m gonna show you how to live off the urban environment. One of the things my old man taught me that I’m happy about is hustling gangsters, and in fact...” Ranma paused, looking down at himself, then smirked as he glanced at Shampoo. “Yeah, I think we could do one better.”

Shampoo looked back at him in confusion, but Ranma refused to elaborate, saying it would ruin the joke. “Shampoo like jokes, but not on her,” Shampoo intoned darkly, her eyes narrowing.

But Ranma waved that off. “It’s not on you, it’s honestly more on me. I just want to see your face when I do it, that’s all.”

“This better not be one of those ‘witness me’ things Shampoo has heard about,” she muttered, shaking her head causing Ranma to guffaw, but he became silent the second later, as Shampoo shushed him.

“Tell me about Mousse,” Ranma said instead. “You mentioned him but didn’t go into any details.”

Shampoo winced a bit, then she began to tell the story about Mousse and her growing up, cursing in annoyance when she had to substitute words in order try to explain different meanings, and switching entirely to Chinese at times. But finally, Ranma understood and shook his head. “Do you all know about laser eye surgery? I’ve seen commercials and bulletin boards talking about it. You might’ve thought to send this Mousse to do that, you know? At least then he wouldn’t be as blind as bats are supposed to be.”

“Yes, we know about it. Mousse refuse. He Insulted the Elder Council when he called their offer a handout,” Shampoo answered in Chinese, slowly so Ranma could pick up enough to understand it. “Now if he wants it, Mousse will have to pay for it himself.”

“Ouch,” Ranma murmured. “As for the rest, yeah, that reminds me of my recent experiences with Kuno and his sister.”

Shampoo looked at him inquisitively. “You speak of them before, and how both love one form, hate the other.”

Ranma nodded, and then explained some of the other things that too, going into detail on the poisoning that Kodachi had done. He then laughed and explained how Kuno had actually confessed to all three of them, Nabiki, Akane, and Ranma herself due to some fortune seller. “So at least Kodachi’s not that delusional.”

Moments later Shampoo blinked, staring at Ranma as he dumped the water, she’d picked up from the nearby water drain over now her head. “Okay, Shampoo confused. Could swear you not like you female form.”

“I don’t really,” Ranma confessed. “If not for the fact that I know you don’t want to head home so quick, I’d be pushing us to head back and find a cure. This form’s been way too much trouble. But that doesn’t mean it can’t come in handy.”

She looked at Shampoo, then around, before shrugging, and pulling off her shirt, switching it with a smaller, far tighter shirt. It rode up her stomach, showing Ranma’s bared midriff, and outlined her chest almost like someone had painted it on.

Then, Ranma reached up to her hair and undid the string holding it, letting it flow down to her shoulders in a wavy line. Ranma then tucked the string he’d been using in his hair carefully into his ki pocket, closing the pocket with a button.

At Shampoo’s confused look, Ranma shrugged. “You don’t want to know about that little misadventure just yet. Maybe when I need you to laugh at something, I’ll tell you that story.”

“Shampoo already looking forward to it,” Shampoo answered cheekily, then gestured with one hand up and down Ranma’s body, taking it in with her eyes at the same time. *My God! If Ranma had been with me on that yacht, we couldn’t have moved for men flirting with us!* “There is reason for this?”

When Ranma continued to explain, Shampoo burst out into laughter, saying in Chinese, “Oh God! It’s like, like calling the herd, you only pick out the idiots. Do you also catch and release, so that there’s more later?”

Most of that went right over Ranma's head, not understanding many of the words. The fact that Shampoo was giggling as she spoke made it even harder. But eventually, Ranma understood, and he laughed. "I don't hurt any of them permanently."

"Pity. If it Shampoo, she hurt them so hard their little thing never stand at attention quite right again."

Ranma blushed at that, and Shampoo laughed, before saying, "Ranma wait a minute, Shampoo do her part too."

With that, she looked around, and bounded up onto a nearby balcony, just out of sight of where Ranma was walking. There, she quickly reached into her ki space, pulling out a few things.

When she jumped down back to Ranma, Ranma gulped, her eyes almost bouncing inside their sockets, and not because they were following Shampoo's jump down. Rather, she was staring at the bouncing that accompanied it. Shampoo had switched out from a long sleeve silk shirt to a T-shirt, which, while large on her frame, still couldn't encompass her chest without looking overly tight. That chest also bounced with her movements, much like Ranma knew his own did. Shampoo had also done something with her hair. Instead of the long amazing looking ponytail, she had doubled it up into a series of ponytails, making her look much younger almost than she had before.

"Your you're not wearing a bra any longer?" Ranma voice was somewhat strangled as he tried his hardest to keep his eyes on Shampoo's face.

Smiling flirtatiously Shampoo rolled her shoulders back, thrusting her chest out even more, saying in Chinese, "You're not the only one can contribute to this act of yours you know. And I wouldn't feel right with you playing the bait on your own."

"Okay," Ranma answered, his voice coming out high-pitched, and Shampoo could see a few signs of arousal on the other girl. The way her legs were rubbing against one another, a hint of nipple poking through her t-shirt. "I understand that. It, it will be doubly effective, I guess. One girl might actually seem suspicious if our target has any brains at all. Two, all giggling and acting tipsy, that'll fool a lot of people."

Once Ranma finished describing the word tipsy, Shampoo questioned, "How often are we going to do this tonight?"

"Well, I don't know about you but I got no money really." Shampoo agreed with that, she only had enough for a night in a hotel. "So, three or four groups I'd say. We won't be back this way so it doesn't matter what the locals think about a rash of gang-morons getting their rears kicked in."

“And you be no uncomfortable?”

Ranma blinked at her. “What do you mean?”

Going a most of the night without a bra including small fights? Even Shampoo needs more support during fight.”

Ranma shook his head. “Nope, I haven’t needed anything like that yet.”

“Lucky bitch,” Shampoo grumbled good-naturedly. “Great-grandmother say eventually martial artist can become strong enough not need one, but still should wear for propriety. Given some of the lingerie...” she intoned, taking a certain delight in the Japanese word, “Shampoo has seen, propriety seem not mean what she thought it meant.”

She laughed as Ranma’s blush returned, linking her arm with the redhead’s. “No be like that, Shampoo certain Ranma become quite cute in good clothing, yes.”

“I don’t want to be cute in this form,” Ranma protested. “Remember, long term I want to get rid of it.”

Shampoo grimaced. *Well, better sooner than later, I suppose.* “Ranma...Shampoo come clean with something about cursed springs. Cursed springs no really have cure. Least ways, not that Amazons know.”

That caused Ranma to pull up short, staring at her companion. “W, what!? But, but there’s a spring of drowned man isn’t there!? I heard about it a few times when going through the area around the springs.”

Shampoo pulled the redhead along, seeing more lights in the distance and hearing voices and music, meaning they were coming up on a busier segment of the city. “Spring of drowned man, spring of drowned pious priest, many different springs. But springs do not cancel.”

“N, not cancel...” Ranma stammered, looking horrified. “What do you mean?”

“The curses don’t cancel, they merge,” Shampoo said in Chinese, before switching to Japanese and saying, “they link, they work together. Best Shampoo can explain.”

“You mean, I’d be both boy and girl!?”

Shampoo nodded, then shrugged her shoulders. “It sound much worse than it is. In fact, it could be interesting.” She winked at Ranma,

Ranma just stared at her deadpan, then smacked Shampoo on the forehead. "Pervert." Then Ranma winked at the now-pouting Shampoo. "Come on, enough serious shit for one night. Let's find some idiots and roll them for their cash."

"Shampoo only understood cash there, but still think she understand enough," Shampoo mused, her pout disappearing into a snicker.

However, as they walked, Ranma had one last question that he (currently she) needed the answer to a lot more than he had thought a moment ago. "What about you Shampoo? I mean, you just said I can't get rid of it, but what does that mean if we... that is if this whole thing between us goes someplace. What I mean is, I'm you're not going to want to kiss..."

"Why Ranma say that? Is not unusual among Amazon sister get together."

Ranma blinked. "I think I lost something in translation, you're not really meaning sisters..."

"All Amazons be sisters," Shampoo answered, before grunting in annoyance and switching to Chinese, "I mean that I know several girls our age who have gotten together with other girls. Heck, I once experimented with a girl. Kissing was fun with her but Mousse ruined it. He nearly hurt her permanently. If Mousse hadn't been able to explain it away as an accident, I might've been down one or both of my friends. At the time, anyway," she muttered, looking away. "I lost him as a friend later regardless."

Seeing Shampoo somewhat distressed, Ranma pulled her into a gentle hug, their breasts squishing against one another, before she shook her head. "I'm sorry to hear that, and don't worry, if Mouse ever shows up, I know he's more dangerous than his whole being blind thing would make me think."

"Is good," Shampoo said with a nod, then shook herself before leaning in and very deliberately kissing Ranma on the lips.

Ranma blinked, blushed, and then slowly returned the kiss and found it was very different kissing in this form. Her tongue wasn't quite as long, but her lips were softer, and seemed a little more... tingly. Ranma wasn't certain how to describe it otherwise, but however she described it, the kiss still felt good to Ranma.

After Shampoo finished showing Ranma that his curse form wasn't a problem, the two of them moved down the street, and Shampoo looked at Ranma, bouncing along brightly, looking at the different bars, and shaking her head. She looked a cross between drop dead sexy, inebriated, and cute. It was very strange to Shampoo, but she reflected that was what her own change in attire had been designed to go for, so hopefully it worked.

The two of them continued to talk, letting loose a little giggle or loud drunken laugh as they moved down the streets, until finally they got a bite. A few men began to follow them, not with their eyes, but actually coming up behind them, while a few others disappeared into alleyways before appearing ahead of them. "Shampoo think it working," she said dryly. "We need to worry about guns?"

Ranma waved her hand airily. "Not with punks like this. If you see anyone missing a few fingers, that's a good sign you're playing with someone serious. But in any case, most of them will only use guns as intimidation. If they pull it out at all, it'll already be in close, and in close against the martial artist, a gun is just..."

"Shapeless mace," Shampoo finished for them, grinning cheerfully.

"Just always watch what you're drinking when you're out like this," Ranma went on, her voice low and serious. "One time, my old man and I were in a bar, and I saw this woman get something dunked in her drink. It must've done something to her, because she was all giggly and well, er acting like what we're acting like now. That was one of only a few times I've seen my old man actually step in and interrupt something like that, made me respect him a bit more, for a little while anyway. Until he took money from her purse just like he did the perv who tried to drag her into an alleyway."

Shampoo shook her head at that, although her first thought was that the woman as stupid to not notice she was acting in the way that she shouldn't and deserved to pay in cash for the stupidity. It would be the least way she would pay for that kind of thing.

Then, two men were coming out from behind them, putting her arms around Ranma and Shampoo's shoulders. "Hey ladies, you two looking for a good time?"

Moments later all ten assailants were unconscious, piled up against the wall like blocks of wood. And the two martial artists were several thousand yen richer.

The two of them dealt with four other groups who thought the two of them were easy marks, or as one of them put it, able to be bought. At that point, Ranma shook her head, and gestured up to the rooftops. "I think we've got enough cash, and this is starting to make me feel really dirty."

Shampoo blinked at him in astonishment, and he shook his head quickly. "Not dealing with these idiots like this! You're kicking them in the balls was fine. No, it's knowing they were thinking about us like that."

That caused Shampoo to think, then shudder. A second later the two of them leaped up onto the roof where Ranma pulled a small portable heater out of his pack, lighting it up and putting a mug on top of it. Re-braiding her pigtail with the string from the ki-pocket Ranma poured in some water and the two settled down to wait. Moments later, he was male once

more and they spent a few moments counting out their well-earned cash. Among their findings were a few cards, but when Shampoo wondered about them, Ranma shook his head. "If you want to buy anything now, we can use those. But we shouldn't use them too often and leave them somewhere nearby. Credit cards can be easily tracked."

"How do you know that?" Shampoo asked in Chinese, frowning worriedly. That kind of thinking bordered on the really criminal, rather than just the wandering martial artist taking advantage of criminal's level.

Ranma shrugged his shoulders. "My old man did that occasionally when we rolled yakuza, and at one point, had the police on us really quickly."

That made sense, and Shampoo held up a gold watch. "Same with this?" Ranma nodded and she shrugged, looking back at the jewelry, wondering who decided gold necklaces were in for men who had fake tans and if she could find him and break his legs for that idiocy.

They returned to their original hideout above the train station. There, the two bedded down to sleep, wanting a few hours before they hopped onto the train.

This move was something Shampoo had not done before, but when it came to it, that move was pretty simple. The train hadn't built up any speed yet, when both of them landing on top of the roof. Shampoo stumbled but Ranma grabbed her arm, holding her steady and then gestured her down, on all fours. They hid among the top of the train for a few moments, and Shampoo giggled somewhat worriedly as they both laid out, their heads near one another so they could talk without shouting over the noise of the rushing wind. "If Ranma wanted kiss Shampoo, all you need do say so."

Ranma smirked, shook his head, seeing Shampoo look over the side worriedly. "Don't worry about the view, you'll get used to it," he said soothingly. "Just don't stand up for now. We'll be out of Tokyo soon, and then we can move around a bit more freely, but I think there's a tunnel on this one."

The two of them stayed there, but soon talking became a bit hard, even with their heads side by side. Ranma decided to get some more sleep, while Shampoo pulled out a Josei manga from her bag, getting through two of them before the train began to slow to a halt in Sendai. There, Ranma roused Shampoo, explaining they needed to get gone before the train entered the station.

Shampoo stared across at the passing rooftops, a sweatdrop appearing. "Shampoo no think she make that."

The Chinese girl then whooped as Ranma picked her up in a princess carry. *Oooh this is just like a scene from the romance manga I just read!* Shampoo squealed internally.

Without even a running start he leaped, clearing both the distance and the height needed to land on the nearby rooftops. There he kept going, leaping away from the train station. "Since it's daytime, there might be people who saw us leap from the train, so it's better to put some distance between us and the station."

Shampoo nodded then leaned her head against Ranma's chest, revealing in the muscles she could feel despite their shirts being in the way. *He might be as thin as Mousse, but Ranma is much more muscley... mmm.... I like.*

A few blocks later, Ranma announced they were far enough away that they could now hopped down to the streets, Shampoo forestalled this by moving her hands up from where they had been clasped around Ranma's shoulder into his hair. "My hero," she said, before leaning up to kiss him.

Ranma returned the kiss, and both of them became quite enthusiastic quickly. They were teenagers after all, and as dedicated to the martial arts as they were, one of them had been reading romance novels actions since she was eleven, and the other was, well, male.

Soon, Ranma's tongue poked out from between his lips, tapping gently against Shampoo's lips. She eagerly opened her mouth, allowing Ranma to twist his tongue around Shampoo's own, the young girl whimpering a little at the sensation. Sensations Ranma was causing hurt just by kissing. Shampoo had a lot of things from her romance novels she wanted to try, and now she finally had someone that she was willing to try those things with.

But eventually the two of them moved away from one another and with a series of gestures and blushing smiles, Ranma gestured them down to the streets below. They spent the next hour getting to know the area by the simple expedient of picking up brochures about the area. But this, and the lack of empty lots and regular dojos, showed there was nothing in the area that would interest them long.

With that in mind, Ranma decided they could continue the trick they'd used last night before moving on quickly. During the day, pickings were slimmer but eventually they found the city's red-light district. Although nowhere near as busy in the morning as it was in the day, there were still a few morons around.

Here however, they found something new in the wallets of the punks who had attempted to take advantage of two young nubile women: a series of calling cards. One mentioned a Yamazaki Group running an esteemed martial arts get together, and seeing that, Ranma twitched, shaking his head with a scowl, a response Shampoo called him on. "What wrong?"

"It's a kind of code. You put in the word 'group' spelled like that, and they're talking about yakuza. Still, the underground fights could be interesting."

“Shampoo find interesting the fact that underground fights have cards at all,” she quipped.

Ranma laughed, shrugged her shoulders. “Here in Japan, there are a lot of formalized things like that hidden under the surface.” Ranma pulled out the other card murmuring, “There’s this one too.”

Shampoo looked over his shoulder, deliberately pressing her breasts into the shorter girl’s head. The card read ‘Street FIGHT Japan’ and Shampoo frowned. “Isn’t that just the same thing as the other one?”

“Yeah, but this one, Street FIGHT, I’ve heard it mentioned before,” Ranma explained about the tournament that he and his father had seen upon returning to Japan.

Shampoo’s eyes narrowed slightly at how he had bet on this ninja girl. But she reminded herself that the two of them had not been together back then. “Hmm, this sound interesting too. Still wonder about whole card thing but is good anyway. Fighting needed to know how to grow.”

Nodding Ranma agreed, pointing out that both sites were to the south. “That could help us throw off my Pops too, shifting to the south after laying out a false trail like you suggested.”

Shampoo frowned a bit at that, then shrugged. “So long as stop and learn on way, Shampoo agree. Leaving Japan before learning all we want be a bad idea.”

She then switched to Chinese. “I also want to try to find some acupuncturists to learn from along with martial arts. I think a precise style based around acupuncture, needles or pressure points like that would be a good mix between my own weapons-based styles. I already know a lot about pressure points, but not acupuncture. Both can also be used in healing and building up our ki.”

Nodding eagerly at that, Ranma smiled at her. “That’s a great idea. I also think we both might want to learn some aikido. My old man always looked down on it, but it’s a really graceful style, and mixed in with traditional Wing Chun and Anything Goes or your own style, it could be something great.”

“Ooh, that too too good idea,” Shampoo answered. “Way of peaceful fist known to Amazons but not very much.”

Heading back to the train station, where they picked up the next train heading to Niigata.

OOOOOOO

That morning, Genma woke up with a migraine. This wasn't anything unusual however, and he reached to one side of his bed, where he routinely left half a bottle of sake to help him get over it. Staring around, he scowled at seeing the empty futon to one side of his own. *Damn, that's right, the brat's not here. The useless boy's gone, sleeping out in the wild, and after acting so last night with that Chinese vixen. That'll need to be fixed, or my cushy future isn't going to be so cushy, but for now...* With no need to get up and push the boy, Genma fell back onto his futon, snuggling in.

This state of affairs did not last long, or at least not long enough for him. His old friend, Soun tapped on his door, saying aloud, "Genma, if you don't get up, you won't get any breakfast. Kasumi didn't buy anything that is for breakfast this morning that can be kept out for long."

Instantly, Genma was on his feet. Lazy he might be, but a glutton Genma certainly was and he knew it. "I'll be right with you, Soun old boy! And then, maybe we can talk about my wayward son and what we have to do to get him back in Akane's good graces."

But Soun nodded, but then cautioned, "But only after you've done a day's work, remember."

Genma grumbled a bit at that, but Soun had been firm on that point the evening before. If Genma was going to stay, he needed to contribute to the house finances.

When the Saotomes first arrived, Soun had been more than happy to have Genma and Ranma staying with them. For one thing, Genma's check from Dr. Tofu was a welcome addition, something he wanted to have continue. But for another, Ranma's presence, his obvious skill and abilities, insured that not only would the Tendo Dojo rise to prominence within Nerima, but that it would remain in their family as it did.

Like Genma, Soun had wanted to live off of Ranma's abilities, which he had seen were phenomenal. Far more than any of his daughters had ever shown, indeed, Ranma showed a greater aptitude for and understanding of the Art than all three combined. Kasumi had never enjoyed the hard style of Anything Goes, nor the mental side. Nabiki saw it only as exercises to keep herself in shape, and Akane, for all that she claimed to be his heir, had no real desire to grow beyond the point she had already reached.

That was good, and it may have made Soun's decision not to train any of them seem all the better. This way, Ranma's abilities and style in the aerial style would be inextricably linked with that of his own school.

"Of course," Genma answered, the two men clapping one another on the shoulder. "I'm just worried that Shampoo's feminine wiles might be enough to make the boy forget she tried to kill his female body for months. We need to keep an eye on him, the boy's young after all."

"True, the foreigner is indeed an issue. But I still maintain that absence will make the heart grow fonder," Soun rejoined. "Leave him out there for a few days on his own out in the cold, and Ranma will be grateful to come back, apologize to my Akane, and the two of them can finally stop dancing around one another. Youth, they are so bad with feelings, aren't they?"

"It's not that cold," Nabiki said dryly as he passed by the two men heading downstairs. "And, if your stories are to be believed Genma, both of you are used to living on the off the land on your own." She shuddered dramatically. "You'd never catch me doing that kind of thing."

"Of course not, you're a weak girl," Genma said unthinkingly, before Akane, who had just come out of her room, smacked him upside the head with a hammer, sending him crashing to the floor below the stairs.

"Still think girls are weak old man?" she taunted, glaring down at Genma as she hopped over his body. "Honestly, you and Ranma both of you spouting off that chauvinistic stuff in this day and age."

"Yes well," Soun muttered, pulling up his friend and guiding him to the table. "Akane, you'll see Ranma at school. If you can figure out where he's been living, we can go and see how he's doing this afternoon."

"Why the hell would I want to talk to that pervert!?" Akane bellowed, glaring at her father as she dropped to the pillow next to the table with all the grace of a bull. "I told you all what I saw, him, and that, that Amazon hussy kissing! On our roof!"

"Oh, I fully agree he needs to apologize to you Akane, but I doubt that girl gave him any choice." Soun waved that off. "Regardless, I want to make certain he's properly repenting on his actions. And doing so we can keep Shampoo from sinking her claws into him when he's vulnerable."

Akane scoffed, while Genma quickly agreed with his friend. "Too right Soun. Once we know where he is, we can take turns watching over him so the woman doesn't influence him. Do that and my boy will remember where honor lies." *And the faster the better. the longer Ranma is left on his own, the more the boy might start to think for himself, and that just won't do. Especially not with that vixen around.*

Watching this, Kasumi sighed. Somehow, she knew Ranma wouldn't be returning. The look he had given her the evening before still stuck in her mind for some reason. It had been... closed off, like a chance gone now. But she stayed silent, listening to the rest of her family and Genma talk as she sat there in the background. As she always had been. *And now*, an insidious thought whispered, *you always will be.*

The youngest Tendo was still angry half an hour later, scowling as she walked with Nabiki to school all, glaring up at the top of the fence as if it had personally offended her.

“Missing him already?” Nabiki teased.

“You wish!” Akane answered instantly, shaking her head. “No, I’m just wondering how tough it would be for me to get up there. It could be at least good training like Ranma always said it was.”

“And now you’re taking his word on something,” Nabiki continued to needle.

“Drop it Nabiki. You saw him, he and Shampoo were all over each other!”

“That’s what you say,” Nabiki answered, changing tact quickly. She loved getting a rise out of her little sister, but it was rather like hitting a low hanging fruit right now. “But when we came up on the roof, they were several feet away from one another, and Ranma at least was glaring at Shampoo. For all we know, she could still want to kill his female form, you know.”

“Hah, there is that,” Akane said with a laugh. “Maybe she’ll kill him the first time he is forced to transform in front of her. Serves the pervert right. And speaking of perverts,” she trailed off, glaring towards the school. “Why exactly, Nabiki, does it look like the Pervert Brigade is out in force? Almost like they know something they shouldn’t?”

“However should I know,” Nabiki answered instantly, crossing her fingers behind her back as she skipped ahead of Akane, putting on a brief turn of speed. “Well, I’ll see you at lunch Akane, have fun!”

Akane glared angrily after her sister, then turned back to the horde of boys. Then she scowled, and began to pick up speed herself, barreling towards the waiting boys like a charging truck. “I hate boys, I hate boys, I hate boys!” she shouted her battlecry. While repetitive, it always worked for her.

As she charged, the voices of the boys reached her in a tumult. “Yes! The information was right.”

“Akane, even without Ranma here, don’t worry! I’ll protect you.”

“No, I will!”

“Date me!”

“With Ranma out of the way, you must date whoever beats you again!”

“God damn it, why does everyone follow that stupid rule!!” Akane shrieked at the top of her lungs as she crashed into the crowd.

Later that day, Nabiki and Akane returned home with the news that Ranma hadn't shown up for school. With shouts about how the boy was once more dishonoring their good name, Genma and Soun left instantly to search for him, before coming back quickly with the news. Ranma was gone. There was no sign of him anywhere in any of the parks of Nerima.

"I tell you Soun, he's ensorcelled! It's the only explanation. That Amazon bimbo shook her ass at him and he runs off!" Genma boomed, slamming his fifth glass of sake down on the table, causing the nearby Kasumi to wince.

Soun scowled shaking said. "Regardless, of why he has left, we need to go and bring him back. Honor demands that he marry Akane!"

"Leave me out of this!" Akane said, shaking her head and making an X symbol with her arms. "I told you, if he wants to be with Shampoo, let him!"

"Which means you'll have to start dealing with the swordsman and the pervert brigade again and not just today," Nabiki stated. "Are you okay with that?" Although she teased her sister a lot, she did care about her, in her own way. Not enough to respect her privacy or anything, but still. "And it means that Shampoo's beaten you in a way. If Ranma finds her more attractive than you, I mean."

"Urk..." Akane grunted not liking either of those comments.

"We'll get after the boy this very night Akane, don't worry!" Genma announced. "Let me change forms, and I'll be able to pick up their trail."

"Right! It's Operation Get the fiancé back!" Soun exclaimed, the two men laughing as Akane protested again that she didn't want Ranma back. Her words fell on deaf ears, and the two men trooped off, leaving the dojo within minutes. Soon, they were back moving around the park with Genma in his panda form, trying to pick up the trail.

When the twosome was gone, the three sisters sat for a time, watching TV and working on various things. As she finished her homework, Nabiki set it aside, smiling at the other two. "Well, this was actually kind of nice. I'd almost forgotten how nice it was to have a day where crazy stuff doesn't happen. Maybe with Ranma gone, things at home can become calmer again."

Both her sisters stared at Nabiki, their eyes wide. "Idiot," Akane stated firmly.

"What?" Nabiki stared back, incredulously. "What did I say?"

"Even I know not to tempt the fates Nabiki," Kasumi admonished.

“Besides, you’ve lived here all your life. You should know that, while he might have magnified it, Ranma isn’t the source of the chaos in our lives. It’s been here in Nerima all along,” Akane added

Staring at her sisters, Nabiki held up a finger as if she was going to argue. But after a moment the finger lowered, followed by her head smacking against the book in front of her as she let loose a groan.

This groan was interrupted by a shout of “Dojoyaburi! I come to challenge you for your dojo sign!”

Nabiki raised her head, stared towards the door, then slumped back down, continuing her groaning. But while Nabiki continued to groan, Akane simply stood up, and shouted out, “Wait a second! I need to go get changed.”

There was no reply from the door, so Kasumi decided that whoever was out there was going to be polite enough to wait outside rather than demand to be shown into the dojo first. With that, she picked up the small tea set she had been drinking from and heading back into the kitchen. “Akane is going to work up an appetite, I think I will prepare snacks.”

That seemed to perk Nabiki up, and she stopped groaning. But even so she completely missed a small scarf-covered head poking out from underneath the outdoor patio. Nor did any of the Tendo sisters see the blur of movement as the individual who had been hiding underneath the house leaped towards the nearby rooftops. The individual was small, shorter than even Akane, his features somewhat mousy, but his eyes gleamed with the joy of a spy uncovering a secret. “The mistress and the master must be told! The rumors are true, Ranma has run off!”

OOOOOO

Ironically, at the same time that a challenger had appeared in front of the Tendo dojo, Ranma was just finishing a challenge that he had made to a local dojo in Niigata. Landing behind the dojo master, he tapped the back of the head of the dojo master, then when the man turned even so, smoothly shifted around his outthrust hand. Grabbing the older man by the wrist, Ranma flipped him so the older man in the black gi crashed into the floor of the challenge rain back first.

At that, the watching journeyman who had been the referee for the match shouted, “Match over!” in a tone of shock. “The Challenger wins.”

The martial arts master, a middle-aged man built somewhat like Soun, but with a full beard instead of just a mustache, looked as if he wanted to cry as he stared up at Ranma. “That, that didn’t count! I wasn’t ready.”

"I let you move first, how could you say you weren't ready?" Ranma retorted, shaking his head.

Around them, the man's students stared, some of them muttering to one another, either astonished or appalled at how easily Ranma had beaten their master. But for his part, Ranma was majorly disappointed. The dojo was just a regular Judo dojo, despite the sign outside boasting that it had its own actual style. *Back in Nerima everyone and their mother seemed to have a different martial arts style. I guess we're going to have to be a bit more picky about this kind of thing when we're moving around. How did my old man find all those different martial arts dojos that actually did have their own style? I can't remember us ever stopping at one like this.*

Shaking his head at that, Ranma turned back to the dojo master. "As specified in the challenge, you owe me a forfeit." Traditionally, the dojo Challenger would make a demand in the form of some favor or item, be it money, or something else, like the dojo sign, if he won. If he lost, the Challenger would have to work for the dojo for a time, until the master decided his debt was paid. "But don't worry, I won't take your sign or anything. I just want you to put me and my traveling companion up for the night."

"Ve, very well," the dojo master muttered, getting to his feet, and the two of them bowed to one another. Ranma's bow was noticeably shallower than the Masters, but as the winner, he could get away with being rude like that. In Ranma's opinion it served the older man right for false advertising.

After he was shown to the room where he and Shampoo would stay for the night, Ranma headed outside, where he found Shampoo. She had gone around to a few markets nearby, and picked up brochures, looking for different martial arts dojos. As Ranma was joining her, she yawned, swaying on her feet a bit. Ranma hesitated, then figured that offering sympathy wasn't going to get him clocked, by Shampoo, as it would Akane and was in fact something that a good boyfriend should do. "Er, are you okay?" he asked hesitantly, putting a hand on her shoulder.

Shampoo looked at him, smiled, and moved into his arm, leaning against his shoulder for a moment, proving Ranma's thoughts on this score correct. "Shampoo just tired. Hadn't really rested since arriving Nerima. Couldn't sleep so well like Ranma on train either."

"Well, I got us a place to stay for the night, so you can head up there if you want now. Did you find any local places that looked interesting?"

"Shampoo found advertisements for several dojos but went to few already. Shampoo not think they worth it. Shampoo also check out a few temples following on Ranma's idea there. Not much help there either," Shampoo said with a shrug.

Ranma scowled a bit, looking at the brochures as Shampoo held them up. "Yeah, I think we're going to have to either rely on word-of-mouth, luck, or be a bit more methodical about this kind of thing. My old man, he seems to've had a knack to find the real martial arts masters that could really train me when I was younger. I didn't really know that there were so many wannabes out there."

Inside the dojo, the martial arts master scowled at the wall, feeling as if someone had just insulted him. Which was more than likely, given how his students were now looking at him, then out the door Ranma had gone through speculatively.

"Ranma right. Still, Shampoo no use if tired. What Ranma do, while Shampoo taking rest?"

"I'll case the area I suppose, like I said, be a bit more methodical about this kind of thing. And then I'll come back later. Do you have anything you want me to pick up foodwise?"

"Shampoo like sweets if that okay?" Shampoo asked hesitantly. She knew that was kind of silly, and very girly, not at all in keeping with the idea of being an Amazon warrior. A lot of her fellows back in the village had teased her about her liking for foreign sweets.

But to her surprise, Ranma simply laughed and she could tell instantly it wasn't a mean one either. "In that case, I think we need to find some cold water and I can show you another good side of having my female form before ya take your nap. Nabiki introduced me to this one, I think it was the only good thing she ever did for me in the three months I was living with them."

Shampoo raised an eyebrow at that but she wasn't so tired that she wanted to bow out. A few moments later, the two of them were in an ice cream parlor, and Shampoo watched as Ranma leaned over the counter, giving the young boy on the other side a view down her shirt. "And could we like, have an extra scoop there of the Double Chocolate Delight? It looks sooo good!"

The boy didn't even seem to have any higher brain function left as he nodded like a bobble doll, putting an extra scoop of ice cream on to Shampoo's choice, and then Ranma's Rocky Road Pistachio Nightmare. Then Shampoo got into the act, leaning forward next to Ranma and nudging her in the side as her breasts smooshed against the shorter girl's shoulder. "Silly Ranma, she not remember we not have that much money."

Ranma pouted, and that was it. The young man was complete putty in their hands, and he squeaked "On the house!"

With that, Ranma stood up, grabbed the two cones of ice cream, handing one to Shampoo, saying cheerfully, "Thanks, mister!"

Walking away, Shampoo teased, "Shampoo think Ranma too too good at flirting in female form. Ranma want tell Shampoo something?"

Ranma rolled her eyes. "Nabiki got me to do that the first time by using the magical words of 'free eats.' At first it did kind of make me feel a little dirty, but well..." Ranma shivered a little as she looked down at the double chocolate delight in Shampoo's hand. "Then she introduced me to chocolate."

Shampoo's brows furrowed. "Ranma not know about chocolate?"

"I'd never tasted it before. And when I tasted it in my girl form it... Well, it was like someone had just exploded a taste bomb in my mouth."

Shampoo hummed at that, and then, feeling a little daring, winked at Ranma, getting her full attention for a second. With the redhead's eyes on her, Shampoo began to lick at her ice cream cone, darting her tongue in and out rather than taking a bite as she licked at the ice cream.

Ranma stared, as Shampoo continued to lick at the ice cream, then at her own lips where a bit of chocolate had gathered before taking a little nibble, then going back to licking. Somehow, Ranma just could not tear her eyes away from the sight, Shampoo's tongue grabbing his undivided attention. Then she stopped, smirking at him, and Ranma shakily stood back a bit, using her free hand to smack her face. "What was that about?"

"Shampoo just want point out that, while Ranma good at teasing, she or he not so good being teased, yes?" Shampoo laughed, delighted at the response she'd gotten, and happy that this somewhat odd first date was going so well. "But Shampoo demand that next time Ranma take Shampoo on date, he be in male form."

"Wait, what, date?" Ranma blurted, staring between the ice cream and Shampoo. "This counts as a date?"

The honest confusion in his voice kept Shampoo from becoming annoyed, and she nodded. "What else you call it when someone takes someone else out for ice cream like this? It's silly preteen stuff but it still date."

"Huh..." Ranma was suddenly very glad that the times she'd went out with ice cream with the Tendo sisters at least two of them had been there at all times. "I didn't know that. I thought dates were going out to dinner or to the movies something, you know, really planned out."

"They no need to be. Although Shampoo would like that kind of date too," Shampoo announced wistfully.

Ranma looked at her, and then, feeling greatly daring, put her free arm around Shampoo's waist, giving her a sideways hug. "Well, then will have to do something about that won't we?"

"Shampoo like that. Thank you," Shampoo responded by putting an arm around the shorter girl's shoulders, noticing once more with some amusement the difference in height between the two forms of Ranma. *All his height must go to his breasts when he transforms*, she thought with a giggle, which confused Ranma as she refused to tell Ranma what she was giggling at.

The rest of their time out, they switched to Chinese, with Shampoo correcting Ranma's pronunciation and adding to the redhead's vocabulary. When they finish their ice cream, Ranma transformed back to his guy form and they continued to walk around until Shampoo yawned again.

Ranma however paused as they continued walking, heading into a bookstore. When he returned with the bookstore, he had a bag under one arm. "What Ranma buy?" Shampoo asked before adding teasingly. "Shampoo no think they sell martial arts manuals in bookstores."

"Nah, they've got some meditation books and stuff like that, but I'd rather learn by doing rather than by reading anyway. But that is kind of what we'll have to do with languages so..." she pulled out the book, showing it was a Japanese to Chinese translation book. Shampoo smiled at that, gave her a kiss on the cheek and the two of them went on their way.

With her new book in hand, Ranma led Shampoo back to the dojo he'd defeated the master in, showed her to the room they were staying in and then left her there. It was the room of the dojo master's son, but Ranma figured that Shampoo was more than strong enough to handle herself if the kid, a teenager their age, made any trouble.

With Shampoo taken care of, Ranma used the rest of the evening to go around the city, looking at different dojos and the few temples. He didn't find anything, but when he spoke to a few of the priests at a local Shinto Temple, they informed him of a martial arts style to the south that sounded interesting. "Martial Arts Construction? Huh... I've heard of it, I think."

"They have small branches in several places across Japan. And if you are interested in the more esoteric arts, I believe there is a temple down there that also teaches spiritual awareness, imbued with some martial arts training as well. That however is just a rumor, whereas I know about the Martial Arts Construction, because we asked them to rebuild our Temple a year ago." The elderly monk gestured around them, while watching the young man carefully.

The scattered temples of Japan routinely kept in contact with one another, regardless of their various creeds. And the name Saotome was known in their circles. While these were holy

men, and knew better than to visit the sins of the father upon the son, those sins were myriad, and if it appeared as if Ranma was as much at fault, or knowingly complicit...

"It looks good," Ranma said, nodding his head even as he continued to sweep around the area. The old man had requested that of him, when Ranma had asked to read any meditation scrolls they had on hand. He didn't even have a problem with paying ahead of time, considering how little else he'd found in the area of real interest. "I especially like the work they did on the Fox statues."

Like many Shinto temples, this one had twin Fox statues, denoting Inari at the entrance. These statues though, looked particularly mischievous, not being of the Fox sitting upright, but on the prowl, lips peeled back into vulpine grins.

"Yes, everyone who stops by likes to comment on those. Personally though, I believe that their work on the toiletries and plumbing was just as important." He smiled as the young man grinned, before poking some fun at the youngster. "When one reaches for the sky, one should never forget that one's feet are firmly planted on the ground."

"Or that one needs to go to the bathroom, no matter how spiritual a life you have," Ranma laughed. But then, he leaped into the air, bouncing all in the air for a few seconds, using some of the things his father had taught him about the aerial style, before landing again, so lightly that there wasn't even a thump, before Ranma what went back to using the broom, a lot of the leaves now in small, easy to pick up windrows.

"Indeed. When you are done, come inside. But let me ask, are you traveling on your own? A young man such as yourself? Should you not be in high school?" the priest gently probed.

Ranma shrugged, internally wincing as he could almost feel a lecture coming. "Not really, I mean, I don't really want to, you know become a doctor, a lawyer, or whatever else other people want to get out of going to high school, I guess. All I want to do is learn martial arts and become the best I can. As for traveling alone, you might say that yeah. I used to go around with my old man but he's settled down now."

To his surprise however, the priest simply nodded his head, stroking his long beard sagely. "Often times in this world, one needs to find one's own path, and occasionally, that path is not on the road already made by society or those who have gone before. I would not equate your journey to that of a monk of my order would take but it has much the same overtones. Come inside when you're done with the walkway. I will show you what scrolls we have on hand, although I warn you, you may be somewhat disappointed."

"Par for the course for the day, if you don't mind me saying. This area isn't exactly a mecca for martial arts," Ranma grumbled a bit. He knew that coming here was important, that Shampoo's idea of laying down a false trail was a good one but today had been kind of boring.

Fun, he realized, when I was with Shampoo, but still, kind of boring. The fact that it could still be fun was somewhat surprising to Ranma, but he set that observation to one side as he continued his work, thinking about what Martial Arts Construction could be like. *I think I remember seeing a dojo sign for them back in Nerima, but I didn't stop in at the time because Akane was with me. Last thing I needed was for her to get better at using a hammer.*

As Ranma was working, the priest was on the phone speaking to several of his fellow priests scattered around Japan. Word would spread that the young Saotome had broken off from his father, and that his father had apparently settled down somewhere.

The priest's observation on the scrolls he had on meditation proved kind of accurate, but Ranma still looked through them. He then spent about an hour following some of the meditating concepts, before deciding to give it up. It just wasn't working for him and he admitted defeat as sunset turned to night.

"Do not be concerned," the priest announced as he noticed Ranma's frustrated expression as he handed back the scrolls. "Perhaps, meditation like this isn't for you. Just like school is not. Do you think better, while you are moving? Or when you are sitting still?"

"Moving. I always think better on the fly, and I always learn better by doing. But isn't the point of meditation, you know, sitting still and trying to get in touch with your inner self, disdaining your physical body??"

"You do not have to sit still to get in touch with your inner self, young man. And considering how far you have thrown off convention in other matters, why should you not do so with this?" the priest questioned, and then asked slowly, "Speaking of scrolls however, you said your name was Saotome, correct? Only, I seem to recall a friend of mine, a fellow priest, mentioning that name in quite negative connotations..."

"Meaning that my Old Man and I visited him, and things began to mysteriously disappear?" Ranma groaned. "I apologize, and you can pass that on. When I was younger, I didn't realize what my old man was up to, but a few years ago I started to, and I tried to put a stop to it. But it wasn't like he kept notes of where we go on or anything like that so I could make him return stuff. It's only been in the last year when I could really make him do anything, anyway."

At that point in his training, Ranma had begun to surpass his father in speed and technique. Not in strength. Genma was powerfully built in both panda form and human form well beyond what Ranma could contrive. Genma could also take way more of a pounding than Ranma. But even so, Ranma estimated that in another year at most his old man would be no match for him.

"Understood. And I did not hear your name connected to any crimes. Trouble, perhaps, and there is no doubt you have left a somewhat arrogant impression on many, but not a

criminal one. But where is your father now? You mentioned that you were now traveling alone.”

“Not exactly alone, but not with him,” Ranma answered, unwilling to bring up Shampoo and other’s budding relationship with the priest. That seemed kind of wrong to him. “I left him back in the Nerima district, if you want to send some leg breakers after him or something.”

“I will have you know that priests such as myself and my friends do not use leg breakers,” the priest huffed, but although his eyes were twinkling. “We might however send some priests to speak with him about why it is wrong to steal from temples and other holy places.”

“If you’re not cursed yet, we’ll make you wish you were’ kind of thing?” Ranma laughed, nodding his head. “Go for it. If anyone deserves that kind of thing, it’s the old man.”

After that, Ranma returned to the dojo where he had won a night’s lodging, finding Shampoo returning from grabbing food for the two of them. They greeted one another, and then headed up to the room, using the teen’s desk as a table, eating as Ranma explained what he’d learned.

Nodding thoughtfully at the short-term goal, Shampoo asked, “So, what Ranma want do long-term?”

“I want to head into India,” Ranma answered easily, with a smile on his face as he stared up at the slowly lightening sky above them. “Maybe hit up some of the islands or that, but my old man and I turned back at Vietnam. Anyway, there are a few martial arts masters in India who were rumored to have styles that sound inhuman, magical. I didn’t even believe them, I thought our turning around was fine, then, we went to Jusenkyo.”

With that, Ranma shook his head, laughing quietly. “That seemed to work like a dam had burst. We ran into a few other magical things while running away from you. And now looking back at those stories, I gotta wonder.”

“What kind of rumors Ranma be talking about?”

“There is supposed to be a kind of martial art there that allows you to mold your body, lengthen your legs and arms and suchlike. Maybe even create fireballs and other element attacks.”

Shampoo frowned pensively. “Shampoo never hear of something like that. Element attack, yes. Changing body no.” She paused again, then scowled. “I hate this!” she said, switching to Chinese. “How exactly do I sound when I’m speaking in Japanese? These young men who tried to ‘flirt’” she raised her hands putting quote marks around the word, “with me once called me a bimbo, I thought at first it was a comment on my looks but...”

Hearing the word bimbo in Japanese among Shampoo's rapid-fire Chinese, Ranma winced. "You want to slow down, I think I know what you're talking about but..."

Shampoo sighed and said simply, "Language barrier suck."

Ranma nodded, then, squeezed her hand. "We'll get through it. Think of it as something to do while our bodies are too sore to do anything else."

She chuckled, then asked the question about what a bimbo was and Ranma's wince returned. "Yeah that's what I was afraid you were asking. It means a woman who is not very smart. Pretty, but with nothing in her head, basically."

"So, like the man who tried to hit on me on the ship I took to Japan. Handsome, strong looking, but not really, and too stupid to not take no for an answer," Shampoo mused, although she continued to speak in Chinese. It was time for Ranma to stretch his communication skills for a change.

Ranma didn't object to this, and slowly worked out what he said. Then he laughed answering in the same language. "Yeah. Pretty much. Also, like what Ranma sound like in Chinese yes?"

Laughing, Shampoo decided to change back to the previous conversation. "I'm fine with going to India, that sounds amazing. A part of me would also like to head to Greece. I understand that they also have legends of Amazons, and it would be fascinating to see what our foreign brethren are like. But India, and the other Asian areas are just as good for me. I also want to try to keep up with my other lessons. And maybe we should start looking around for some other means of gaining money. We won't always be lucky enough to find stupid idiots after all."

"Meh, you'd be surprised. Stupidity like air, always there," Ranma retorted, the two martial artists sharing a snicker.

By that point both of them were done eating, and Ranma started to tell a story about the time he and his Pops had been run off by a pair of female foxes who had just had kittens, and how his Pops had tried to explain that his whole 'women were weak' thing was only about human women. Shampoo in turn commented on how she had learned to roofhop through the trees and had startled an owl of his nest, and then been chased by it through the woods until her great-grandmother had scared it off.

Her rendition of the owl's affronted had Ranma in stiches. They both then took turns making the other laugh as they cleaned up, headed over to the bathroom to brush their teeth, and came back, still joking with one another, until Shampoo decided she wanted to do something else. She signaled this easily by hopping into Ranma's lap. "Fun friend time done now. Girlfriend boyfriend time start, yes?"

Taking the hint, Ranma leaned forward, kissing Shampoo on the lips, who eagerly returned the gesture. A few seconds passed, and Ranma then pulled back, before moving to kiss Shampoo on the cheek, then up to her ear, nibbling. Ranma saw Shampoo bite her lip at that, then moved down to her neck as Ranma did the same, finding a place on Ranma's collarbone that made him grunt, a certain reaction growing underneath her rear. Ranma moved back to her mouth, kissing her tenderly, while Shampoo's arms tightened around him.

Just as Ranma was about to open his mouth and let his tongue out to play, the door to the room abruptly opened, and the teenager came in, carrying a book bag. He stopped, staring at them, and then shouted, "Oh God dammit! Just because my father said you could use my room, didn't mean you two could get hot and heavy in here! Not when I, when I... you bastard!" he shrieked pointing at Ranma.

Growling, Shampoo hopped off of Ranma's lap, and was suddenly holding one of her Chui, pointing it at the teen. "Shampoo think rude little boy need be taught lesson!"

The boy quailed but Ranma grabbed her arm, stopping her from committing murder, before gesturing the youngster to grab whatever he wanted, and then get out. "And just to make sure that there's no hot and heavy whatever, Shampoo can sleep in here, and I'll sleep outside in the hallway."

Shampoo made to object, but then shrugged her shoulders, understanding that they weren't nearly at the position where they would feel comfortable sleeping in the same bed, and this one was built for one person after all. "Although I don't think I'm going to get into that bed either, I'll just sleep on top of the covers instead. Who knows what this little boy has done in it?"

"Harsh," Ranma laughed, as he translated what Shampoo had said in Chinese.

Thankfully, there were no further incidents, and the two of them left early the next morning. The two of them lay down a false trail, being seen by lots of people heading towards the port during rush hour. From there they even swam out into the ocean for a way before coming back ashore further south. Once back on shore, Ranma used maps to lead the way towards where the Martial Arts Constructions school was.

At one point Shampoo called a halt, having seen a few doctors in the area that offered acupuncture and traditional medicine. Since Shampoo had proved by now that she could read written Japanese far better than she could speak it, Ranma left her there, giving her the address of the Martial Arts Construction place and heading on towards it.

He started to hear the sounds of demolition about a block away from the actual address he'd been given, although it wasn't quite like the sound of other construction yards Ranma had passed in the past. Interspersed with the sounds of heavy equipment and the din of people using jackhammers, were shouts of, "Hiyaah!" and "Ha!" followed by the sounds of flesh hitting

wood or stone. There was even a shout of, “put your backs into it! Your hands are the hammer, the nails your target. Always remember, strike from your shoulder down, get your full body into it, each time. And if the nail bends, you are off target! You’ll have to start your rows again.”

Because of these sounds, Ranma was not surprised when the dojo itself turned out to be a construction yard. In the center of the yard, there was a large three-story house, which looked extremely well-made, with several ornate statues at each corner of the patio which seemed to go all around the house. There was even a small pond, complete with a bridge over it.

Around the house was a cleared zone, filled with stone, gravel, pipes, wooden slats, several types of equipment large and small, various types of shingles, stones and so forth. It looked like someone had taken a construction yard and a landscaping shop and mixed them together before sticking a sample house in the middle.

Different areas seem to be set up for different techniques. In one zone, Ranma saw men performing muscle strengthening exercises, lifting a large block of concrete or steel and setting them down, again and again. In other places, there were rows of wooden slats set up and men standing in front of them, using their palms to strike nails into the wood. To one side of that, a journeyman seemed to be lecturing several students about the proper method of laying down electrical wires, while using a wire in one hand almost like it was a whip to pick up various tools on the ground around him.

Looking around him though, Ranma had to hold back a laugh as he took in the students of Martial Arts Construction. The fact that all of them were wearing construction hats, and visibility jackets was fine. Every dojo had their own martial arts outfit, after all. But the members of this dojo were **all** burly middle-aged men. Even the students looked older than their voices sounded and had muscles upon muscles. *I wonder if that’s a prerequisite or a byproduct?*

Ranma stood in the entrance to the construction yard dojo for a moment, trying to pick out which among them was the master. But with most of them being middle-aged and built similarly, that wasn’t easy. *Unless that guide teaching the youngsters about electrical wires is the master?*

Regardless, there were certain proprieties that Ranma had to stick to. “Dojoyaburi! Here comes a challenger” he shouted, reaching up to bang one hand on the metal plate that did as a sign above the entrance.

Instantly, all work stopped, even the men working with the heavy equipment pausing, and Ranma noticed for the first time that on the other side of the man with the jackhammer was another man, working on destroying another slab of concrete. As he stood up, Ranma could see him ringing out his hands, and whistled internally. *If he could keep up with the speed of the jackhammer, that could be interesting to learn.*

“Who dares challenge the construction dojo?! We’ll tear you apart like a building made out of mud and paper!” shouted one of them, moving to stand threateningly over Ranma. All the others meanwhile started to do muscle poses. “It takes a real man to work construction!”

While the words were different, this was part of the act, and Ranma rose to the challenge. Darting forward, he lashed out with a single jab. The man saw it coming, but couldn’t dodge, barely able to put his weight onto his back foot before the blow crashed into his chest. He stumbled back, and then Ranma was in the air, leaping up and into a roundhouse kick that took the man in the side of the face, hurling him sideways and to the ground.

Both strikes hadn’t been as strong as Ranma could make them, so the guy got to his feet a second later, but Ranma had proven his strength, and he shouted out, “I am here to challenge the dojo master, not the students.”

The journeyman looked down at the student who had moved forward to challenge Ranma and the first place, then lifted him into the air with a flick of the electrical wiring he was using like a whip tossing him towards several of the other students. “And who are you?”

“Ranma, of the Anything Goes School of Indiscriminate Grappling, Aerial Style.” Ranma added a bow from the waist to the man, who returned the gesture. “I am on a training journey and wish to contest with your master. I will not challenge for your sign, or for the pride of your dojo. Only to see if there is anything I can learn from you.”

The journeyman nodded, pleased with Ranma’s manners, and then barked out, “Foremen, we have a challenger!”

There was a moment of silence, and then the door to the house banged open. A man strode out, his hair noticeably gray, but his shoulders and visible forearms just as muscular as all the men around Ranma. He was also taller, about a foot or more taller than even the journeyman. He wore glasses and had a short cropped beard, under which he wore what looked like a good suit and tie, but with the arms ripped off at the shoulders. “Thank God! If I had to spend more than another twenty minutes talking to would-be clients, I’d have to hit something anyway.”



(Think of a mix of these two images)



Seeming to sense all eyes on him, the older man growled angrily at his students. “What, do I hear any volunteers to take over

talking to them again? Just because we are Martial Arts Constructions doesn't mean we can do the impossible, or do any of you want to sit down with the client and explain no, we can't build them a floating castle again?"

Ranma blinked, but apparently there was some kind of story behind that, as every student and even the journeymen, the man who had greeted Ranma, and the man who had been trying to keep up with the jackhammer, both looked away or muttered apologies. By the time Ranma turned his attention back to the master, he had pulled off his tie, tossed it to one side, and was in the process of replacing the torn suit with a safety jacket over a muscle T-shirt much like the ones everyone else around them wore.

"Huh, that was quick. But I gotta ask, if you were talking to clients on the phone, why the suit and the tie?" *And why the heck did you rip the sleeves off?*

"It's help me get in the right mindset, you little piece of shit!" the master bellowed, startling Ranma with the profanity as the older man set aside his glasses. "After all, clients can't do with real fucking manly language! This is a real construction yard boy, we curse is much as we breathe here!"

Ranma slowly shook his head from side to side, then walked forward, as the man turned his attention away, heading around the house in the center of the yard to the area behind it. The theme of a construction yard merged with a landscaping area continued there but it was marked by several large arm's-length screws drilled into the ground marking a circle. There was a lot of stuff within the circle, but it was evident that it was still supposed to be a ring. As Ranma watched, a rope was strung between the nails, marking the edge of the ring even better.

"My name is Ishiku, and I am the motherfuckin' leader of Martial Arts Constructions!" The man said, stepping lightly over the rope while Ranma behind them, landing across from Ishiku in the ring. "My journeyman Yama told me you challenge me to learn from my school? Why not just fucking join up, brat? We could put some muscles on your frame!"

"Hell no, all that muscle would just slow me down, and I like my own school thanks!" Ranma retorted, causing Ishiku to guffaw. "I win, and I get to observe and train alongside your people. Myself and one other," Ranma added hastily remembering Shampoo. *She would probably be very pissed that I almost forgot, although honestly, I can't see her being happy around here... Unless she actually likes the view of all these... manly... guys.*

Ranma tried to think about that for a moment, then shook her his head. He doubted it, but the thought annoyed him for some reason, and following that feeling, he pulled off his normal silk shirt, hanging it up nearby, standing there in a muscle tee.

While he didn't have the muscles of the guys all around him, something they let him know through jeers and shouts of derision, Ishiku didn't join in. The boy was obviously built for speed and his muscles reflected that, giving Ishiku a hint of what was to come. "Fine! Although

I'll add the caveat that if you train with me, you'll have to actually fucking work on construction projects with my crew. And if you're not actually joining my school, you're not going to get paid for it. And we fight until one of us has his back fully on the ground, the other above him ready to deliver another blow."

"Kind of tightfisted, but yeah, sure." Ranma shrugged.

Ishiku nodded, grateful that Ranma didn't quibble on that point. "This agreement has been reached and witnessed by my students. So unless you have a second?"

"I do, but it doesn't matter. She's off looking elsewhere for other styles anyway. I'll trust your honor and that of your students," Ranma answered.

"Good!" Ishiku clenched one fist, slamming into his palm, then crouched down, putting up his hands as if he was a boxer, although Ranma noticed that while one fist was tight, the other was loose, as if it could switch to a grapple. *Or, Ranma realized, grab up the material all around them. Well, it is Martial Arts Construction. It would be kind of strange if he didn't make use of props. But he is not the only one that can do that.*

The martial arts master waited for Ranma to take a stance, but he stood there, his arms at his side, his knees slightly bent, as he seems to rock on his feet. That caused Ishiku to scowl, but not with anger at Ranma's supposed arrogance. No, he understood that Ranma's stands might seem unguarded, but the young man was ready to move deflected or blocked anything. *He's good, this isn't just a young man being arrogant then. Excellent.* "Ready? Go!"

With that, Ishiku stumped forward before quickly, grabbing up a wooden floorboard and launching it towards Ranma. Then with that one hand he kept on grabbing more of them, hurling more than a dozen forward before the first had reached Ranma. "Martial Arts Construction: Floor Assault!"

Ranma smacked and battered them aside, but Ishiku grab them out of the air before they hit the ground, slamming them down into the ground in front of him, before throwing a punch as Ranma closed in, forcing Ranma backward. The air whistled as Ishiku closed, one foot lashing out not at Ranma, but into a bucket, hurling it up into the air, where his palm slammed into the back of the bucket, sending the nails within out like a shotgun blast.

Grunting with effort Ranma smacked them aside before rolling forward, and Ishiku leaped up over him, lashing out with a kick which Ranma blocked, caught, and turned into a throw, which hurled Ishiku to the side. It didn't seem to hurt him though, simply knock him off his feet.

But Ishiku landed on a pile of quicksand bags, grabbing up one of them and hurling it at Ranma, before slamming his hand down onto the ground. The wooden slats that he had

previously thrown bounced where they had hit and when they came down, they were in a path of a road leading street towards Ranma. "Martial Arts Construction, vinyl finish!"

The bottom of his feet were covered with some kind of slick substance, which he used to skate forward faster than Ranma had anticipated and Ranma grunted in pain as several blows struck him before he could fall back, blocking what he could. A second later as he was forced to the side of the ring, Ranma blocked the third punch that came his way, flipping up and into the air, lashing out with a kick that caught the martial arts master in the side of the face, sending him stumbling. *Fuck, that hurt! This guy's stronger than my old man.*

In return, Ranma's blow didn't hurt Ishiku, and Ranma had to pull back quickly lest he be grabbed by the martial artist's other hand, which suddenly was holding nails. "Nail Targeting!"

With that, Ishiku launched nail after nails towards Ranma as he was in midair, thinking to skewer him easily. But Ranma, while wondering where the man was pulling the nails from, was able to dodge most of them, only one of them slamming into his side, leaving a hole in his shirt and some blood coming from where it had hit his side. But it hadn't penetrated.

Ranma's next kick caught Ishiku face, sending him stumbling. Ishiku rolled to one side to avoid another kick, and Ranma touched down, finding himself assailed by a pipe which Ishiku had grabbed up. But once more, Ranma tapped the front of the pipe, pulling himself up and into the air, where he lashed out with a series of punches, then bounced around Ishiku's head as Ishiku lashed out in turn, trying to catch Ranma and pull him down.

Four strikes to the head later, Ishiku realized that wasn't going to work. Ranma was as at home in the air as on the ground, if not more so, and his ability to use momentum and Ishiku's own attacks to stay above him like this, was astonishing. *I need to change the fight around a bit. If I can get a hand on him, it's over but doing that is harder than I thought.*

Thinking quickly Ishiku fell back under Ranma's assault reaching behind him to grab a series of pipes and a wrench, tossing the pipes and wrench into the air. This allowed Ranma to bounce up still higher, kicking off of the pipes and where they were in the air, but Ishiku raced forward, catching each of them in turn, and built himself a gantry in about twenty seconds, which he then began to climb, almost like a monkey, using one hand and his feet, while the other one grabbed another bucket and used the Nail Barrage again. "High Rise Combat!"

When Ranma fell down towards the ground, the gantry was in place, and within the gantry's environs, he and Ishiku traded blows. And it was here that Ishiku revealed two more secret skills within his school. "Jackhammer Blow!"

With that cry Ishiku's hands almost disappeared to Ranma's sight, hammering into him in several places as he quickly tried to escape the attack, shifting away enough the blows

couldn't hit him. Interspersed with the punches were attempts to grab him, but the two times it worked, Ranma was able to break the grab by slamming a hand into Ishiku's wrist.

Grunting in annoyance at how durable Ranma seemed to be, Ishiku found Ranma's foot impacting his stomach, causing him to double over, his Jackhammer blow assault ending. he tried to grab at Ranma's foot, but it failed, and the next second a hammer punch crashed into the back of Ishiku's head, hurling him down towards the ground. He stop his fall thought, and twisted around, grabbing at a series of safety ropes. Within seconds he had them all tied together and hurled them froward, "Safety Net!"

"Ya really gotta work on naming stuff!" Ranma grumbled, leaping to another segment of the gantry only for Ishiku to twitch his outstretched arm, sending the net after him.

Ranma grabbed at the net, but then found himself hauled into the air, and towards Ishiku . But to Ishiku's surprise, Ranma went with it, releasing his grip on the net as he somehow bounced up and over Ishiku's shoulder. a backward mule kick as Ranma pushed off one of the pipes in the gantry caught Ishiku in the back of the head, and before he knew it, the net he had created struck him. It didn't tie him up entirely, but it was enough of a distraction that Ranma's next punch dumped him to the ground, where he found one of the pipes wrenched out of the construction and tapping his chest where he lay on the ground. "My match."

Scowling somewhat at being beaten like that, Ishiku nodded as he tossed off the net. "Damn, I should've just fucking retreated every time you took to the fucking air like that."

"I would've had to come down to try to get through your defenses, yeah," Ranma agreed, setting down the surprisingly heavy pipe. *Huh nearly everything around here is so heavy they remind me of Ryoga's umbrella.* "Still, that was pretty good match."

"Agreed. You beat me fair and square. You wanted to learn from my school, right?"

Ranma nodded, grimacing slightly at the pain of the blows he had taken looking at Ishiku thoughtfully. While Ranma won the match fair and square, Ishiku didn't even look winded despite the amount of strikes Ranma had landed, while Ranma had taken a lot of hard blows, way more than he'd had since the last time his father had been able to really overwhelm him in a spar. Hell, even Ishiku's face didn't look battered, which was even more humbling given how many punches Ranma had landed there. "I think there's a lot of I can learn here. Both in terms of actual construction, and martial arts."

"Excellent!" Ishiku laid a heavy hand on Ranma's shoulder, nearly knocking the youth over, gesturing him towards the others and out of the ring. "Come on then. We'll start you with simple stuff, but we'll have you using your hands to hammer in nails before the day ends."

"That works."

Ranma was working with the others on precisely that thing, when Shampoo leaped down from a nearby building over the construction yards safety wall. "Ranma!"

"Hey Shampoo," Ranma said, waving one hand, even as he thrust forward with the other, grimacing slightly at the pain from slamming his palm into the nail. Still, the whole nail went into the wood, and Ranma realized that was pretty good progress. *And if I stopped learning when I got bruises, I'd have never learned to walk a fence, let alone do anything else.* "Any luck?"

"Yes! Shampoo find martial arts acupuncture, eager to learn style. Precise, small-scale attacks, with big results. Excellent to offset Shampoo's weapon style, yes. Is too too hard to learn though," the Chinese girl added worriedly.

"Yeah, although if you're using needles, I would think it would still count as armed style right?"

"Needles only start. After learn, can use finger," Shampoo answered proudly.

All around them, the other men in the construction yard, including Ishiku, who was overseeing the journeyman having a competition with a jackhammer, stared at Shampoo.

The other journeyman, the one who had greeted Ranma, and seemed to be the electrician, came over and did a muscle pose, as he stared down at Shampoo. "Little lady, this is no place for the girls. Only manly men can be in here, the sacred area of the construction yard!"

"Oh, you shouldn't have said that," Ranma murmured turning back to his next nail, and with a grimace, punching this one, before wringing out his hands. *Yeah, that is harder on the knuckles than the palm, annoying. Still, it will toughen up my hands something fierce. And I can see that being useful in the future. To say nothing of the other things that Ishiku showed in that match, and the speed technique with the jackhammer blow thing.*

Shampoo world on the journeyman and was suddenly holding her large chui. "Unconscious man say what?"

"What?" The man answered, before Shampoo brained him with one of her maces, sending him crashing to the ground, unconscious.

"Anyone else want call Shampoo weak?" Shampoo growled. "Where Shampoo come from, that fighting word!"

"Then I really want to be where you came from lady!" Ishiku guffawed, as he came over, the other journeyman following him, ringing out his hands like Ranma had been a moment ago. "Daichi, we'll continue later. Get Yama up and into the house. And the rest of you, my match with Ranma should have shown that powerful things can come in small packages!"

He nodded towards Shampoo. "Little lady, while not exactly approving of how trigger-happy you were just now, your defense of yourself was fucking awesome! We'll get along just fine."

While Shampoo smiled, bowed from the waist, and returned her maces to her energy space, Ishiku turned to Ranma, gesturing with his head towards Shampoo. "I take it she is your plus one?"

"Er, the way you say that phrase makes me wonder, but yeah, Shampoo is the other student I was thinking might join us. But she just said that she had found another style she wanted to study so I suppose she'll just stay here with me?"

"Well if you thought she was going to stay here, I'm afraid we're going to have to build you a house for a bit!" Ishiku guffawed, slamming his two massive hands together. "After all, we're all guys here, and having one woman sleep in the room with so many guys, that just wouldn't be right."

"We could get a hotel..." Ranma began, but Ishiku had already turned away, looking around at his watching students, who were blushing and looking at Ranma at Shampoo, hearts in their eyes.

Ranma frowned at that, while Shampoo was also kind of confused. The muscles on display were nice, but if Ranma was just learning, that meant he'd already beaten the master here, which means that while they had impressive muscles, they weren't as strong as Ranma.

"In fact, what is the first rule of Martial Arts Construction boys!" Ishiku bellowed.

"Learn as you do!" came the shouted reply.

"That's right. Book learning can only take you so far! You learn by doing and by watching others. So Ranma, you're going to put up a little house just for you and Shampoo. And we'll help, won't we crew?!"

"Yes sensei!" came the shouted reply, although Ranma heard one whisper of, "anything to have a cutie like her stay around a bit."

While he didn't like that sentiment, he couldn't argue with it, and he bowed from the waist towards Ishiku. "You realize that Shampoo and I will only be staying here for a few weeks at most, right?"

"Judging by how fast you learned some of my techniques already, and how well you're handling the nail punch training, yeah, I can see that. But we could use a second house as a sample house anyway. Two birds with one stone, lad," Ishiku bellowed, slapping Ranma on the shoulder.

“Then I’ll agree. Shampoo, you want to help out?”

“Is good! Shampoo can learn today, chiropractor only wants train Shampoo in the mornings anyway.”

“Woohoo!” several of the students bellowed, and all of them began to pose, as they had been when the student had challenged Ranma. Shampoo looked around at them in confusion, while Ranma put in arm around her with shoulders, pulling her into a brief hug. “Just go with it, they’re good guys, just really awkward.”

“So long they know not flirt with Shampoo,” Shampoo agreed.

Thankfully, while the Construction Crew guys were a bit odd, they seemed to understand that Shampoo and Ranma were together. Indeed, many of them just asked about that as Ishiku and the journeymen got to work, going over the plans for a small, one-story house. The fact they were on a training journey together seemed to be an extremely romantic idea to the construction crew.

“Alright you lot, when I call your name, group up by number!” Ishiku began, then went on. Soon, Ranma was working with a crew to prepare the ground for the house, clearing away the area, digging a bed for the concrete, while Shampoo began to help to put together piles of material from around the yard for later use.

As they worked, the crew around Shampoo started to show off. They weren’t flirting with her per-se, but they were trying to get her attention. Posing was fine, as was showing off, but when one of them brushed Shampoo aside and made to lift a pallet of wooden slats saying, “Oh let me get that for ya, Miss,” Shampoo decided that was enough.

“Shampoo got it,” she shot back, hip checking him. Her hip smacked into his own with enough force to send him stumbling, and with barely a grunt of effort she hefted the pallet up over her head. This made her shirt pull out of Shampoo’s tai chi pants and showed off the Amazon’s bare midriff, something she at first was not aware of.

“Guh...” The same could not be said for the burly men all around her, who stared at Shampoo and that slice of skin in shock, red covering their faces.

“Girls man... they look so soft,” one of them murmured.

“Yeah, but she’s strong too... why the hell is she with that twig again?” another one muttered. The approval of the couple’s relationship had suddenly taken a dive.

Once more, Shampoo didn’t notice this, only setting her pallet down, showing off her rear accidentally. Turning around, Shampoo saw the group she’d been assigned to just staring

at her, and she huffed, putting her hands on her hips. "Grr... is Shampoo strength so surprising it freeze you all like statue? Does Shampoo need smack heads again?"

"She's right you lot! Get moving!" one of the Journeymen bellowed.

Still, the showing off persisted. Not a single pallet could be picked up without the man doing posing in some fashion. Indeed, many of them would call out to her, shouting, "Hey Miss, watch this!" or "Hey, I've got this, Miss Shampoo!"

But Shampoo was an amazon, and regardless of rippling muscles or size, she was just as strong as they were, and she wasn't impressed by it at all. Every time she was called on, she would stare, then just shrug and turn around going back to work.

Ranma however did notice, and feeling his competitive urges rise up again, started to show off in turn. Not having many shirts, he first pulled off his Muscle T, leaving him be in just his pants. Then he began to race around, lifting up several of the construction tools, several overfull pallets of wood, rock slabs, and so forth that would have taken one of the journeymen or Ishiku to lift on their own. He also moved faster than any of those three could.

Looking over, he saw Shampoo looking his way more than once, and smirked whenever one of the group trying to impress her looked his way. *Well, that seems to be working, heh.*

You know, I once read that most people think women aren't supposed to react to, what was it, visual cues, as much as men. Whoever wrote that is a freaking moron! Shampoo thought, biting her lip. It was all she could do to keep from drooling. God, it's like watching a panther move! Mousse who!?

For Shampoo, raw muscles and power were not a draw. Real strength was, which Ranma had. Regardless of his size, Ranma was stronger than anyone there bar Ishiku and the two senior students. He didn't have their muscle mass, but that wasn't important. Every muscle and sinew that Ranma had was defined on his spare frame, and while his arms were not as big as the men around them, his six pack was just as impressive. And when the construction crew moved, it was ponderous, not clumsy but slow. When Ranma moved, he was under complete control, moving like some great predator even while doing something so blasé as kneeling down.

The two of them continued to work as the house went up in an incredibly fast time. Normally a house like this, though simple, would take at least a week, maybe longer with modern equipment. Even a 'sample house' would take that long. The Martial Arts Construction school was finished the walls, plumbing and most of the electrical lines by the time evening began.

At that point, stomachs began to rumble, and most of the crew was pulled off the work. As his crew sat around drinking and now talking to the newcomers, with Ranma talking to Yama

and going over a book about wiring and plumbing, Ishiku pulled out a cell phone. "Alright crew, what do you lot want to order for dinner?"

"Thai!"

"Nobunori's!"

"Okonomiyaki!"

"Pizza Palace!"

"Oooh, yeah, hot wings!"

All these and more were cried, but Shampoo looked around, and shook her head. "Shampoo no want to put Ishiku out like that. Paying for takeout for this many, it be too too expensive. You have kitchen and ingredients, Shampoo cook. It be thanks for putting us up in luxury like this."

The Amazon's words caused silence among her listeners, all of whom stared at her, including Ishiku, whose jaw dropped in shock. "A, a home cooked meal!?"

Wondering what the significance of that phrase was, Shampoo nodded. "Yes. Shampoo be just as good cook as martial artist you know."

Ranma's addition of 'I'll help too' was lost as many of the MAC students burst into tears. "A home cooked meal!"

"A meal cooked by a woman!"

"OH my god, I must be dreaming! Something beyond takeout!"

"Kaa-sannnn!"

Even Ishiku was in tears as he bowed several dozen times towards a now thoroughly startled Shampoo. "Missy you just made us all so, so happy! Do you have any idea how long it's been since any of us had a real, home-cooked meal? Bentos and other takeout just doesn't cut it."

"Er... right. Shampoo not promise much until see ingredients but," Shampoo was interrupted by Ranma, who had pulled on his muscle T and over shirt by this point, volunteering to go get whatever she wanted. She smiled at him, causing many a grumble from the rest of the crowd as she moved off to the main house.

Coming back, she gave Ranma a long list of ingredients, and he and Yama hurried off, spooked by Shampoo's gritted teeth and twitching face. They weren't out of shrieking range before her voice reached them as she laid into Ishiku and the others. "You put raw meat and chicken together! You have eggs so long they go wrong! Milk is not best left after due date! Your kitchen a disaster, you, you idiots!"

As they ran, Yama looked away from Ranma's confused look. "Just... just don't ask. We um, it's not exactly easy to find girlfriends when you spend all your time building your muscles or training, you know?"

To say that Shampoo's quick meal of meat buns, fried rice, and several radish dishes was a hit, was an understatement. Indeed, there was another spontaneous combustion of tears from many of the men even before they ate it. "Oh my god, a real girl, a real girl has made us a meal and is even handing it to us, a home cooked meal!"

Smirking and deciding she wasn't really happy any longer to be the sole object of attention from dozens of men, Shampoo picked up a bottle of water from nearby and tossed it towards Ranma. Ranma was just handing another man a plate of food and didn't see the water coming, the bottle erupting as it smacked into him. "If you want girl serve you, Shampoo able to bring out other girl!"

"Gah, Shampoo, what the hell, girl!?" Ranma yelled, turning toward the other girl as the man who she had just handed a plate to dropped said plate in shock.

"That's our line!" bellowed many of the MAC crew around them. "Wha, what just happened!?"

Ishiku even looked horrified, staring down at his water bottle. "She's put something in the water! It's some Chinese magic curse!"

Shampoo turned in his direction, laughing cackling like a witch for a moment until Ranma smacked her upside the head and went on to explain her curse. "Stop blowing their minds like that, eesh. What it is, is a curse I got in China, so you were right on that, but it ain't Shampoo doing it. What happened was..."

After he explained his curse, the MAC students fell into three categories. The first were appalled and worried a lot about how magic was possible and what it meant. The cry of "Where does the mass go!?" was shouted by this portion of the crowd, and the best mathematicians among them quickly broke out the sake.

The second group were simply stunned, but also kind of horrified by the idea of turning into women, saying it would be a fate as bad as death. Ranma might have agreed with that crowd at one point, but now seeing Shampoo lay into them with a spoon and her words, felt quite justified in not mentioning that at the moment.

This left him open to the third group, which pulled him aside, and, giving Ranma a serious case of déjà vu, one of them asked, "So, er, since that isn't your natural body and all, would you um, that is would you mind giving us a look?"

All the side conversations ended as a wail rose up by the main as he was tossed several hundred feet through the air to land in the small pond in front of Ishiku's house. The next man crashed into the out wall of the construction yard, missing one of the bulldozers – they were there just as comparison, much like the jackhammer - by a foot.

"Drat, I missed," Ranma announced flatly, turning to the rest of the crowd, her eyes lit up like hellfire by the various lights around the area. "Anyone else want to ask about something perverted?"

A mass of shaking heads answered him and Ishiku could be heard to mutter, "Damn female fury, reminds me too much of my ex-wife that does."

The rest of the meal passed uneventfully, with Ranma turning back to his male form and Shampoo sitting with him, talking quietly about the traditional doctors and acupuncture experts she wanted to study with. If some of the MAC students around them seemed to blush and stare at them, with one of them mentioning the word 'yuri' under his breath dozens of times, neither Ranma nor Shampoo commented.

After all, it is kind of true, Shampoo reflected. Eventually we will be going that way, if our relationship keeps on going, anyway.

After dinner, the two of them were shown the sitting room and the kitchen by the journeyman who had handled interior design. As the two of them were looking at the bathroom though, he made tracks, snickering under his breath. The couple didn't notice this until after they had taken out their toiletries and played a game of rock-paper-scissors to see who would have the first bath, which Ranma won despite Shampoo's best efforts at a puppy-dog face.

"Huh, where'd Daichi go?" Ranma asked, looking around.

Shampoo huffed, heading to the doorway. "Shampoo no know, too busy being annoyed by Ranma not knowing proper facts of life about girlfriends and bathrooms."

"Oh, get over it. I've used the Puppy Dog Eye Attack myself Shampoo, ya need to work on your pout and making your eyes wider to get the full effect. Still..." Ranma looked over at Shampoo as he turned on the hot water, having already filled a basin with cold water to wash with. "They're a bit awkward, but I think they're good guys, yeah?"

"Mm, Shampoo understand they need more female touch on lives in general, but yes, she agree, they are good guys," Shampoo answered, tempted to stay and watch Ranma change,

but when Ranma paused, giving her a pointed look, she instead winked, and left the room, deciding they weren't ready for that just yet. While both had seen the other's body before this – or at least Ranma's female form above the waist – seeing it in this kind of setting seemed too intimate for where their relationship was just yet.

About forty minutes later, Ranma came out of the bathroom, only to find Shampoo sitting in the main room, glaring at the book in her hands as if it had personally offended her. "IS there something wrong with that manga, Shampoo?"

"Grr. No. Just.. look at the bedroom," Shampoo replied in Chinese, seemingly too angry to translate to Japanese.

"Huh?" Doing so, Ranma stared, for the image in the bedroom was worthy of both his shock and Shampoo's anger. The entire room was done in tones of red and pink, and in the center of the room was a massive stand-alone bed shaped like a heart, complete with red blankets, heart-shaped pillows and frills. "GAH!"

"Yes. That thing is a monstrosity, and I have half a mind to go find Daichi and introduce him to my chui!" Shampoo snarled, still in Chinese.

Ranma only got one out of every three words there, but that was enough for him. "Yeah, I don't think I even want to sleep on it. Do you?"

"NO!" Shampoo snarled, shivering. "Gah, it looks like those horrible hotel rooms you can rent for a few hours."

With that agreement reached, the two of them bedded down in the sitting room.

Despite that prank and their rather violent response to it the next day, the couple's time in their ready-made house proved quite nice. As they had learned that first day, most of the MAC students were generally nice guys, who, while jealous of Ranma to a certain degree, fully supported the idea that a martial artist could get a hot girlfriend, and the two wanderers continued to cook for the crew, cementing their place as fast friends to all of them.

On the martial arts side, those two weeks also served both of them well. Ranma learned far faster than anyone else Ishiku had ever met, learning everything Ishiku was willing to teach him, and even some of the secret techniques the school used. His book learning fell behind, but that was all right by both Ishiku and Ranma.

To Ishiku's delight, while Shampoo decided that Martial Arts Construction was not for her, she dedicated as much time as Ranma did with Ishiku on muscle strengthening exercises. She also worked with the various local doctors who practiced acupuncture. She learned quite a bit from it, and cheerfully told Ranma about it every night.

During that time, Ranma's toughness training on his hands bore fruit, and by the end of his time there, he could punch metal (he broke the concrete too fast) for hours without feeling it in his hands at all. He also figured out the weapons space trick that Ishiku had used in their match.

Unlike Shampoo's version, Ishiku organized his ki space. He called it the 'personal cabinet,' because that was what he turned his weapon space into. He could even, somehow, this part Ranma was still having trouble with, label each item, so that when he had a thought in his head and reached into his weapon space, only that item would come to his hand. This was unlike Shampoo, who kept her chui in her sleeves, and some of her other traveling items in a ki-expanded backpack.

"Do you think that we should both go through that toughness training? Over our entire bodies I mean? Rather than just our hands," Shampoo asked. In the two weeks they'd been here, Ranma had helped Shampoo with her Japanese much more than Shampoo had helped him with Chinese. She needed the help in order to talk more intelligently to the acupuncture doctors, and it had paid off.

"Of course," Shampoo had said at one point, "when we leave Japan, we'll be switching to Chinese most of the time. You'll need to learn how to speak a civilized language abroad after all."

"Doesn't English count?" Ranma asked since he also knew that language. Shampoo's deadpan look at that didn't need any translation, and both of them had fallen about laughing.

"Maybe, but I'd like us to figure out a better way of training it rather than just, you now hammering on something, with various parts of our bodies" Ranma said now in reply to Shampoo's question.

Shampoo paused from where she was combing her hair thinking, her eyes suddenly elsewhere. "Is that what was going on??" she murmured to herself in Chinese.

Ranma still didn't understand her though, and asked what she meant, whereupon Shampoo turned, smiling excitedly. "I think, I think there's a kind of toughness training! I saw some of the blooded warriors in my village being subjected to it. They were hung on a rope and swung repeatedly into a large boulder. I thought it was some kind of torture, but if it isn't, then maybe... I remember one of them being hit by a chui to the head, and the mace breaking rather than her head! That's got to be it."

After he translated Shampoo's rapid-fire Chinese, Ranma nodded. "Yeah, that makes sense. But unless we want to ask Ishiku to use his wrecking ball on us, we're going to have to wait until we get away from civilization a ways to try and set something like that up."

“True. Now tell me more about this personal cabinet ki space thing. Being able to make better use of my ki space would be great, and it sounds almost like what Mousse does, only not as ki intensive,” Shampoo ordered. Like Ranma, she took martial arts very seriously.

Ranma did so, and from there the conversation segued into ki, what it was, how to build it up and so on. Shampoo had seen a lot of its use over the years but didn't really understand the general workings or how one built it up. Ranma in turn understood how you built it up, and one way in which he unconsciously used it: healing. Ranma had been using it that way for years, thanks to Genma's torture/training.

And both of them had seen ki used to enhance weapons. Shampoo's grandmother continually used her ki to enhance the strength of her walking stick, while Ranma had seen it used to enhance Kuno's bokken into something as hard as steel. He'd even used it himself on occasion.

Between that, and the work they had both done on ki space, the young couple was able to meditate and feel out their energy reserves, manipulating it to a certain degree within their bodies and clothing. What to do with their reserves beyond what they already knew though, was a question. Because neither youngster understood how to project it out of their bodies like Ranma had seen in so many cartoons.

Regardless, two weeks flew by before both of them had learned as much as they could from the locals. Worse, the day after Shampoo had a revelation about the training she had seen, Ranma saw a poster up asking about a loose panda in the area. When he reported this to Shampoo, she was a little annoyed, convinced that she could have learned some more about herbal medicines at the least if they stayed.

But compared with the annoyance of having the panda interrupt their time together, Shampoo was willing to move on. “I don't want us to trouble the Martial Arts Construction folk, they been quite nice to us,” she said, gesturing around the small one-story house they'd made on the first day.

The heart shaped bed was still a bit much in her opinion, and both of them had refused to sleep on the monstrosity. But it was the thought that counted, and the rest of the house was actually very nice.

“Agreed. It's just a shame.”

Shampoo looked at Ranma in confusion, and he shrugged a bit. “I didn't work with Ishiku and the others today, I went out in my girl form trolling for idiots. Probably a good thing if my old man is in the area, but it allowed me to build up enough money to actually take you out on a nice planned-sorta date like we talked about a few weeks ago. Now we'll have to wait until we move on for it.”

Shampoo smiled at that, and hugged Ranma's side, leaning up to give him a kiss on the cheek. But later that night, in the dead of the night, the two of them left with no one the wiser, leaving behind a brief apology note for not saying goodbye to Ishiku and his school.

OOOOOOO

"I tell you Saotome, this is where I was told Shampoo was staying. And if she's staying here, it's dollars to donuts that your boy is staying here too," Soun announced.

Genma snarled, staring in annoyance at the construction yard ahead of them. "I'll agree that it does sound like the boy, wanting to learn another style and add it to our own, just like I told him to over the years, Tendo. At least that hasn't changed. But why this one?"

"Ah, but you are not thinking strategically my old friend." When Genma turned to look at him, Soun went on, speaking as someone who actually had run a dojo at one point and knew one could not live off martial arts alone. "You may see this just as a martial arts style, but it is in fact a commercial product. Something that could be very useful while on the road just for the two of them. And could also be used to make the two of them some money."

"True," Genma answered thoughtfully, nodding his head. "And in the future when we drag him, er, that is when we convince him to do his duty and marry Akane, you can even offer it as part of the dojo's teachings."

"Exactly! As much as I'm furious with your son for being so dishonorable as to run the instant some foreign floozy comes along, at least he did something right. Now, let's get in there, and finish Operation Get the Fiancé Back!" Soun declared.

"Be careful Tendo. Remember that Shampoo will be with him, and if she's used some kind of vile Amazon magic to control Ranma rather than just her wiles, we might have to fight both of them to free the boy."

Soun nodded seriously, and the two of them moved to the entrance to the construction yard. "A challenger appears!"

Minutes later, the two of them were running back out of the construction yard, with several dozen of the Martial Arts Construction students racing after them with Ishiku in the lead. "Run away! Run away!" Genma shouted.

"After them! Capture the enemies of true love!" Ishiku declared.

"Right!" bellowed his students in response.

They didn't get far however, before there was a tinkling sound to one side, and a hurled Buddhist staff impacted Soun's legs dumping him to the earth. Genma leaped up over a similar

staff that whirled in aiming for his legs from the side but couldn't dodge a clothesline. "Nirvana lariat!"

Rolling on the ground, Genma grabbed at his throat, groaning in pain.

Soun meanwhile was able to push to his feet and stared ahead of them as a group of monks leaped down from the surrounding buildings to join the one who had clotheslined Genma. They were obviously monks: bald heads marked by rows of dots, long goatees, and the clothing. But Soun could not remember the last time he'd seen monks so well built or grim looking.

"Genma Saotome, karma has come for you, Namu Amida Butsu. You will return to what you stole or pay for it in this life and the next," the monk in the center of the group announced.

The monks had been busy since Ranma had been at the temple back in Niigata a few weeks ago. Representatives had been sent into Nerima to find Genma, only to find him no longer in residence at. However, Nabiki had been more than willing to sell out both older men for a monetary remuneration. She'd had to put up with a lecture on the lure of worldly pleasures, but felt she still came out ahead in the end.

"Now hold on friends, whatever my friend has done, I am certain that we can work out something," Soun protested.

"We do not think in terms of money or worldly desires. We only want returned to our various sects what this one has stolen. If he has misplaced or lost or otherwise no longer has them in his possession, he must be made to work to pay them off. At which point, only Inari and Amaterasu will judge for how long he must work," the leader, a senior sendatsu, or pilgrimage leader, announced firmly.

Soun made to protest further, about to say that they didn't have any evidence that Genma had stolen anything, when his old friend tried to bolt, only to be cut off by another priest. He and the monk started to exchanged punches and jabs from the monk's staff as Genma addressed Soun. "It's no use trying to talk to them, Tendo! None of them understand the trials one sees on the road! We must escape! Maybe, we can get Ranma to work for them instead, but for now, bringing back the boy to do his duty is the most important thing."

Before Soun could do anything, one of the MAC students reached them, grabbing him from behind with two massive ham-sized hands on either shoulder. "Don't think that you're going to get away from us homewrecker!"

Whirling around, Soun was able to throw the man off his feet, taking the next one with a sliding kick, before leaning into a palm strike that sent him flying into two others. While he had gone badly to seed over the years, Soun hadn't forgotten everything he'd learned from the

dread master. “You seem to be right Saotome, but if they think us easy marks, let’s disabuse them of the notion!”

“Get them!”

“Yama, lead the others in our school’s patented capture method!” Ishiku bellowed, as he charged forward into the melee.

“Martial Arts Construction, Encompassing Fence!” Yama ordered, and ten of the Martial Arts Construction students ranged out quickly around the melee. With two others following them carrying supplies, Yama and his men began to build, a large cage around the fight right there in the middle of the street. Made of steel bars and made to make certain that the largest, most wily animal could not break through or sneak between the bars, no one had ever escaped once within the cage.

Yet this time, it didn’t work. Genma was a master escape artist, and he saw them coming. Grabbing Soun’s shirt, he hurled him upwards shouting “Do the face, my old friend!”

Realizing what Genma meant, Soun instantly began to use one of the few ki techniques he still could. His head grew to many times its own size, as an aura of dread flared out from him, his mouth and face shifting form into something quite demonic looking, complete with long pink tongue and wide, bloodshot eyes. “Go away and leave us alone! Where is the honor in ganging up on two people with your numbers?!”

Accompanied by an aura of fear this technique was made to cause terror in all who saw it, and now, the effect was immediate. Many of the construction workers collapsed where they stood or ran away in gibbering terror. Even Ishiku stumbled back, while Yama and his men all collapsed to their knees in horror.

While the monks were made of sterner stuff and stood their ground reciting sutras, Genma had used this distraction to leap upwards over the cage, landing outside. From there he threw a rope up towards Soun who grabbed it, and was flung to the side, landing on a nearby roof. There Soun leaped down to join Genma in running away as fast as they could go as the monks raced after them, the half-finished cage only a small impediment.

Any plans to try to track the boy down were mute at the moment. They had to save their own hides first.

OOOOOO

Ranma and Shampoo had decided to cross back to the Pacific side of Japan+ rather than the Sea of Japan side, thinking that would throw off any attempt to follow them. They spent a few hours when they arrived in Hamamatsu, which Ranma was quick to point out was near to Nagoya, a city known for its sumo wrestling. Normally neither of them would have much

interest in that, but Ranma remembered the card they had found that first night trolling for idiots, and looking at it, found the address was for a place in that town as the site of the next street FIGHT.

“Maybe if we go there, we’ll get at least some more information about the Street FIGHT circuit and decide whether or not they’re good for us. What do you think Shampoo?”

“I think it’s a good idea, and maybe we’ll even be in enough time to find and watch some of the street fights. But before that,” Shampoo teased in Chinese, wagging a finger in Ranma’s face, “you owe me a date. You said you had enough cash and even a plan, right?”

Ranma nodded, then said they should probably find a place to stay first. They found a hotel that had a room available with two beds, and then, spent about an hour going around using some of the money that Shampoo had earned over the past few weeks, and that Ranma had basically stolen from thieves the day before. Thinking ahead, the duo purchased quite a lot of rope, camping gear, and a new bedroll for Shampoo. The sleeping bags that you could find here in real civilization were **far** better than this stuff that she had left her village with. Even Ranma found one he wanted, but he put that aside since the brief shopping trip was cutting into their cash and he wanted enough to take Shampoo out later.

When Shampoo headed back to the hotel to meditate and play with her ki space, Ranma looked around the area, and found a movie theater in a good side of town, as well as a restaurant that sold ice cream for dessert. He had learned over the past few weeks that Shampoo was almost as much of a glutton for ice cream as Ranma had been for those few days when he was forced to realize that his female body was fully... operational, so to speak. Then, he purchased tickets for the movie, and headed back to the hotel with those and a reservation for tonight at the restaurant in hand.

Back at the hotel, he didn’t go straight back to the room. Instead, he stopped over in one of the public restrooms, changing into a decent suit. Or at least as close as he could get. Long silk kung fu pants, black this time rather than blue, combined with a far more ornate kung fu silk shirt, showing a Chinese dragon down one arm and coiled around one side of his chest. It wasn’t really dressy, but it was better looking than what he normally wore, and very obviously something he changed into on purpose.

The guys back at the Martial Arts Construction school had been very firm on that. The girl always needed to know that you were putting forth effort, even if it wasn’t an ultra-fancy date.

Heading to the room, he knocked rather than opened the door with the key card, and when Shampoo answered it, he grinned at her, watching her eyes widen in surprise. “Hey Shampoo, ready to go out?”

Biting her lip, Shampoo looked Ranma up and down, her eyes going from surprised to tender, as she nodded once. She held out a hand, and Ranma took it, squeezing it gently before pulling on it lightly to get her starting to follow him. She instantly latched onto his arm, and Ranma let her, leaning his head against the top of hers as they walked down the hallway.

“So I looked at the movies, and I decided that I couldn’t stomach any of the romance movies. Sorry but I..”

“Ranma, Shampoo like romance, but only in real life or when reading about it in manga. Movies always too boring. Did you choose a comedy or something?” Shampoo hoped he hadn’t chosen an anime. For a date that would be a bit too silly.

“Action comedy actually, with Fei Long in it. We’ll see if it’s any good, and if not, that can be fun in its own way...”

The martial arts movie they chose was a movie with Fei Long in it, and both of them had been prepared to hurl insults at the screen every time there was a fight scene. But while the acting was only so-so and required quite a bit of heckling on both of their parts, some of the action was actually pretty good. It was clear that Fei Long was actually a decent martial artist. Not up to their level for certain, but pretty good.

“Maybe there is something to Akane’s dreams of becoming a martial artist and an actress at the same time,” Ranma mused, as they exited the film. “The whole film wasn’t all that good, but he tried his best you know?”

“I think that your talking about another girl while on a date with me is a little wrong,” Shampoo intoned, teasing Ranma gently before leaning up to give him a kiss on the cheek. They hadn’t, to her consternation, made out or anything in the back of the theater. But that was all right, as they had both been having too much fun heckling the movie.

“Sorry about that, I’ll try to do better,” Ranma said seriously, kissing Shampoo back on the cheek.

She refused to let it go at that however, and boldly kissed him right there in the middle of the road, causing many of the passerby to look at them disapprovingly. While the Japanese could be affectionate and loving, they kept that kind of thing private. Only showoffs acted out like this in public.

Ranma knew that, and while he returned the kiss for a few seconds, he pulled back quickly, putting an arm around Shampoo’s shoulders and gently turning her away from him, so they could walk side-by-side. “Come on, I made a reservation at a restaurant for us tonight too.”

Shampoo smiled happily at that, nuzzling into his shoulder, and then amusing herself by glaring back at a few people who were looking at the two of them a little too censoriously for her tastes. Soon though, they were at the restaurant, which was a little bit ritzy, but not all that much, and which specialized in American food, whatever that was, along with ice-cream-based deserts.

The two of them entered and were shown to a booth, where Ranma, delighting Shampoo again, handed her down into the seat. When they sat, she reached over the table and took his hands, squeezing them as she spoke in Chinese so as to not mess up her words. "I want to thank you for this Ranma. I've read all of these manga, I've read romance novels for years, but this is the first date I've been on. It isn't everything I imagined it would be, but it's close enough, and I really appreciate the effort you put in."

Well, looks like Ishiku was right about that! Ranma thought ruefully, reminding himself to buy a gift basket and send it back to Ishiku and the rest of the Martial Arts Construction **school guys**. "You're welcome, and you're worth it, Shan Pu."

That was the first time that Ranma had used her name in Chinese correctly, and Shampoo blushed, looking down at her hands, wondering if Ranma understood the meaning of her name, before realizing that she didn't know the meaning of his either. *So at least we're even there.*

Ranma smiled at the blush, squeezing her hands for a moment. Then the two of them parted as the waiter move towards them to take their order.

They were halfway through the meal, talking about various famous martial arts films, and which of them they liked, when disaster struck.

Ranma hadn't been paying much attention to the rest of the restaurant, which had been another thing that Ishiku had told him about. Always pay attention to your date, no matter what. However, his attention was diverted instantly towards the source of a very particular laugh.

"Oh no, please no!" Ranma whimpered, slapping his forehead and about to duck underneath the table.

But it was too late. Kodachi had seen him. She moved towards him, the waiters and the other people in the restaurant parting for her like she was a prophet come to part the waves, although not nearly as welcome. "HOHOHOHOHO, it is you Ranma-sama! Why, fate himself must have allowed us to meet!"

"This is Kodachi, yes? Ranma description of laugh be too too spot on," Shampoo tsked, scowling angrily at the woman who had interrupted her date.

Ranma's response was to bang his head on the table.

Still, Shampoo took that as an affirmative, and slowly stood up, crossing her arms as she glared at the other woman as she annunciated each word in Japanese. "Go away. Can you no see Ranma and Shampoo on date?"

"Bah, obviously you have used your foreign harlotry to ensnare him, as Sasuke reported. But I will have my love free of you now!" Kodachi shouted, and then, before anyone could interfere, she pulled off her dress, tossing it behind her to be grabbed by one of several other young women, who had followed her in.

Ranma recognized a few of them from St. Hebereke's martial arts team and realized they must've come to this restaurant to celebrate a win or something in the area. *Huh, kind of lowbrow for Kodachi, but I suppose the team might have chosen it as a group.*

That was as much thinking as Ranma had time for, because the second Kodachi had tossed her clothing inside, she had also lunged forward in her leotard, a ribbon flicking out from one hand, the other holding a small baton, which instantly sprouted spikes. "Release Ranma-sama from your foul spell or face the consequences!"

"Ranma under no spell, and Amazons no take kindly to threats," Shampoo retorted, lashing out with a knife hand, smacking the ribbon to one side, and then launching herself forward. In her hand, she was suddenly holding one of her large chui, which crashed against Kodachi's defense, chui and baton straining.

Kodachi however did not allow the fight to devolve into strength versus strength, instead giving way, then twisting around to one side. Leaping up onto a table, she ignored the restaurant goers who were now cowering underneath it, kicking a small pot of tea up into Shampoo's face.

Shampoo hissed as it struck, but thankfully it was only lukewarm, not scalding, and she fell back, as Kodachi lashed at her with her ribbon.

Ranma leaped forward, launching a kick at Kodachi, who dodged it and stared in shock as Ranma landed lightly on the table she'd been on a moment ago, while she landed on a second, balancing there as this time another baton appeared in her hand, having lost her club a moment ago. "Darling Ranma, I know well that she is forcing you to fight but, I cannot allow you to interfere with me while I am trying to free you. Get him girls!"

The girls who had come into the restaurant with Kodachi lashed out towards Ranma with spiked balls, throwing stars or clubs. This forced Ranma to dodge and weave between them, while Kodachi turned her attention back to Shampoo.

As he moved from table to table, Ranma debated internally watching the incoming attacks almost as much as the scattered cold drinks around. He really, really did not like fighting girls. Someone like Shampoo got a pass, because she took martial arts as seriously as he did and it would be insulting to her if he didn't treat her seriously. But these girls? These girls were gymnasts, not real martial artists. *So that leaves either continually dodging or getting creative.*

The initial hail of throwing objects faded out, and more than one of the girls pulled out a gymnast's ribbon, twirling it around like a whip, while others grabbed out batons. To others that might have seemed a decent mix of defense and offense as the ribbons whipped past Ranma's head as he continually leaped about, forced away from Shampoo and Kodachi for now. But to Ranma, well...

"Getting creative it is," he said, grabbing one of the ribbons out of the air, and pulling it out of the girl's grip.

The next second, he had another one, and pulled this girl up off of the ground, and into the air. Bouncing upward, Ranma gently touched down on her stomach, then up onto the roof, twirling her around behind them, the girl becoming tied up in her own ribbon before dropping down. As she hit the floor Ranma grabbed two more ribbons out of the air, and then was in among the girls, the ribbons flicking out to hogtie and disable.

Meanwhile, Shampoo had stowed her Chui. There were too many civilians around, and not enough room to swing them. So, she grabbed up the fallen baton Kodachi had been using and twirling it in one hand went on the attack. Leaping up into the air she batted aside Kodachi's ribbon, and then dodged a flung rose. Ranma had told her about Kodachi's pension for poisoning and had no desire to test those poisons out. *I got quite enough of that from those annoying twins!*

Dodging that brought her to standing on top of a table facing Kodachi, and she kicked a plate of something up into the air, whirling around and smacking it with one hand, launching it towards Kodachi. Two more plates were tossed and deflected by Kodachi's ribbon, then Shampoo was rolling forward onto the ground, smashing the table out from under Kodachi.

Kodachi tried to flip up into the air, but Shampoo followed, taking a slash on one arm from the ribbon as it suddenly solidified into an edged club, but punching out hard. The punch caught Kodachi in the center of her stomach hurling her up into the air, where she crashed against the roof.

Shampoo fell back to earth, landed, and as Kodachi gasped in agony and shock, unused to actual punches being delivered in a fight, launched herself upwards again. Twirling around Shampoo brought both of her fists up above her head. Her fists crashed into Kodachi's chest and head, knocking the little girl out entirely.

Flipping away through the air, Shampoo let Kodachi fall down towards the ground and was somewhat amused to see Ranma flick out a captured ribbon, grabbing Kodachi from midair. With that he pulled her into his arms before tying her up and dumping her on the already tied up forms of the rest of her teammates.

In the distance, sirens could be heard and Ranma slapped his palm with the fist of his other hand, muttering, "Oh right, this isn't Nerima." He grinned cheerfully down at the girls, shaking his head. "Have fun explaining this to the cops, girls."

With that, Ranma looked over at the owner of the restaurant, who had come out sometime in the violence along with several of the kitchen staff, many of whom had armed themselves with knives. He pointed at Kodachi, saying simply, "She started it, and she can pay for it all. Trust me, she's got the cash."

With that, he raced over to Shampoo, said, "Time we were gone," and then leaped up towards skylight. Clinging there for a brief second, he unlocked it, kicked it open, and flipped up onto the roof, with Shampoo leaping up after him.

The two of them raced away over the rooftops, putting several dozen blocks between them and the restaurant, before slowing down. When they did, the two of them looked at one another, and then fell over laughing. "Well, that not quite first date Shampoo want, but still fun!" Shampoo howled in laughter.

Ranma also laughed from where he was laid out on the rooftop, and he watched as Shampoo's laughter turned into giggles, watching as she shook her head, trying to get control. Her laughing, flustered face was one of the cutest things Ranma had ever seen and moved by an instinct older than any combat instinct he'd had drilled into his head, Ranma gently reached forward.

Shampoo blinked, and turned to him, her own eyes widening as Ranma leaned over, pulling her into a kiss. Both of them still running on adrenaline from the fight, this quickly became a **very** heated kiss, and the two of them quickly began to make out ardently, their tongues licking and twining around one another.

It was only when Ranma rolled them over so that her back hit the roof, that Shampoo remembered where they were. She gently placed a hand against Ranma's chest, pushing him away, and whispering in Chinese, "Let's head back to the room."

The two of them moved on their way, holding one another as they walked, but not stopping to kiss until they were back at the room. There, Shampoo practically ambushed Ranma, pushing him against the doorway as soon as it was closed. Ranma kissed back just as ardently, but when his arms went around her, Shampoo instantly noticed the change. Gone was the aggressive fervor of before, and its place was the same tender gentle touch as had been in

Ranma's kissing ever since the first time Shampoo had taken the plunge to see if this time, her instincts hadn't let her down.

That caring, gentle, tender touch caused Shampoo to tremble, it really did, feeling him hold her like this, like she was a flower that he could crush accidentally. And knowing how strong Ranma was, having seen him outperform the martial artists at the construction school, she well understood he **was** that strong.

But at the same time, it annoyed her, because Shampoo felt she was strong, and she wasn't going to break. So when Ranma's arms went around her, she reached back and gently pushed one of his hands down until that hand was not on her back but cupping her rear.

Ranma felt the soft, pliant flesh under his hand and froze, allowing her to dominate the kiss for a time, until his brain functions finally began to respond once more. While Shampoo's constant affections, her touches, kisses and desire to be close to him had worn down Ranma's desire to take things slow, he still wasn't all that prepared (or really knowledgeable about) for the physical side of things beyond kissing. Indeed, Ranma had really pushed himself to be romantic tonight, especially the public kiss on the cheek, which Shampoo had taken advantage of.

Yet even so, feeling that soft flesh under his hand, hearing Shampoo whimper something in Chinese which he couldn't translate at present, it awoke desires in Ranma that he had rarely allowed himself to contemplate. So Shampoo put a leg around Ranma's, Ranma lifted her up by her rear, carrying her deeper into the room.

How they got from area by the doorway to the beds, Shampoo didn't know, but soon, she was on her back, with Ranma on top of her, their lips still pressed against one another. No clothes were coming off, Shampoo was very certain that Ranma wouldn't go that route without her permission, and she wasn't prepared to go that far just yet either.

After all, for all of the passion that she was feeling and firmly believing that they were married thanks to her people's laws, Shampoo understood that they'd only really known one another for a little under three weeks. Time away from one another obviously didn't count towards that total, and this was only their third date, and only that if you wanted to count trolling for idiots as a date.

However, she didn't have a problem with feeling one another up over their clothing, and as Ranma pulled back his gaze down at her, Shampoo gently took one of his hands in hers, and pressed into her chest. She watched his eyes widened, and he tried to pull it away. But Shampoo held firm, smiling and nodding in acceptance.

After a second spent staring into Shampoo's face, Ranma gulped, then allowed his gaze to look down at where his hand currently rested. As he did, an expression of awed astonishment appeared on his face.

The sight of that look caused Shampoo to shiver again and thank the goddess Athena the man she had found could look at her so. Not as an object, not as a thing to sate his lust, not someone to be afraid of, simply an object of desire and affection. *Not love, no. Ranma has the right of it there, we don't know each other anywhere near long enough for that. But still.*

Shampoo was not wearing a bra. She had taken it off before meditating and hadn't bothered to put it back on before answering the door. And the touch of Ranma's fingers sliding gently over her shirt, was intense, and she smiled at him as he played with her breasts, until he leaned down and kissed her again as her own hands went to Ranma's rear and abs, delighting in the tone she found there.

How long they made out and played together, Shampoo didn't know, but eventually, their passions had subsided into something softer, and Shampoo fell asleep in Ranma's arms for the first time. It would not be the last.

OOOOOOO

Back in the restaurant, a young girl with blonde hair done up in drills stood up from the VIP segment of the restaurant. She was thirteen years old and had been dragged to the meeting by her father. He explained they were at this restaurant because he was meeting with several of his lower-level managers, and he didn't want to overawe them with his wealth, while also taking them and their families out for a good time.

For her part, young Karin Kanzuki had thought she would be bored out of her mind. The children of the various managers that were brought along were so plebian, so... boring.

Yet the floor show had been phenomenal. The fight between that foreign looking girl, the rather handsome boy and the rhythmic gymnastics team had been phenomenal to watch. The only thing that would've been better would be if this Kodachi girl had actually won her love back from the gaijin whore.

Alas, it was not to be, but she was quite good! And those moves... "I think I just decided that I will change schools," Karin mused as she watched Kodachi pull out a check, write an amount on it and show it to the manager. The older man's eyes widened in shock, and he began to bow profusely.

Yes indeed, Kodachi looks to be interesting, and perhaps she has much to teach me.

Ignoring her father's attempt to grab her shoulder, Karin moved forward, moving to help Kodachi unwrap her fellow rhythmic gymnastics students from their own ribbons. The girl looked at her thoughtfully, then nodded once and returned to her own work, while the restaurant owner talked to his workers, sending out a few to stall the police before turning and shouting that all the meals tonight would be on the house. "My name is Karin and I was

wondering, how would one go to transfer to your school, and how quickly thereafter, could I become part of your Rhythmic Gymnastics Team?"

OOOOOO

Early the next day, the two of them left the hotel. As they did, Shampoo spied a local newspaper in the small shop attached to the hotel. Laughing, she pointed it out to Ranma, who instantly went in and picked it up, reading the article on the front page, ignoring the glares from the store worker. The article's title said, "Martial Artists Gone Mad," and detailed story of what had happened last night. But there weren't any pictures bar one, just as Kodachi pulled off her uniform, to reveal the leotard underneath.

"...So Kodachi got away, or more likely threw her wallet at the restaurant owner and then just walked out," Ranma mused, shaking his head as he looked over at Shampoo. "I did say the Kunos were rich, remember?"

"Shampoo remember. Maybe next time, we roll them, yes?" Shampoo answered, putting an arm around his shoulders. Hesitantly, Ranma's arm when around her waist, and she shivered as he then greatly daring, pulled his hand away just enough to run his fingernails up and down her hip. The sensation was astonishingly distracting even through her clothing, and she reflected that Ranma was getting better at showing affection like that, which she quite liked. "Better, maybe this means she not..."

Quickly, Ranma raised his free hand up to block her mouth, shaking his head. "Please don't say things like that. Seriously. Please!" He then pulled his hand away, frowning as he wiped it on his pants. "Why the heck did you lick my hand? Who does that?"

"It depends on circumstance," Shampoo said, and seeing a chance to get back at him for muffling her like that, which she rather disliked, took his hand again, pushed one finger out, and then licked it. The way Ranma's eyes widened, and his face reddened to her and almost like color, it seemed he got the point. She let his hand fall back and thrust her own fingers forward in a victory sign. "Shampoo win."

That was not what she should've said to Ranma. One thing that his father had instilled and Ranma along with the love of martial arts and traveling was to never back down from a challenge. This one wasn't a martial arts challenge, but that didn't Ranma's instinctual response, only the action thus evoked.

Fighting back his blush, Ranma took her hand before she could pull it back out of his face, and then it was Shampoo's turn to start to blush as Ranma kissed her fingers one after another, then let his tongue out to delicately run along her skin as she had done a moment ago. "Two can play that game," he taunted between licks.

While blushing still at the act, Shampoo's eyes narrowed, and she was about to escalate further, when a cough from one side interrupted them. The store clerk stood there, glaring at them. A middle-aged man, with more than a slight paunch to him, he thrust a finger out to the entranceway. "This is not a library or, or some alleyway somewhere. If you two want to flirt, go somewhere else."

The two of them paused, their hands moving away from one another, and Ranma led the way out of the hotel. "Should we declare a draw on account outside interference?"

"Mmm," Shampoo agreed. *Although Shampoo win next time!* She thought, trying to will away the last of her blush. "But now we go?"

Ranma nodded, and after consulting a map as well as his compass, pointed in the direction they should go. They raced across the street in the diagonal across a crossway, then without stopping, leaped upwards, bouncing off of a lamp post, and then higher and higher still until they were on the roof of the seven-story building there. Then the martial arts couple raced away over the rooftops, ignoring the shouts and exclamations from the normal folk below.

What they could not ignore a bit later, was coming on a recent accident where two cars had collided. There were sounds of an ambulance in the distance, but there was so much traffic it might take a while for any aid to get to the accident, and Ranma could see that at least one of the cars engines was still on, and both were leaking gas. No one else was moving to help them, so with a hand gesture, Ranma directed Shampoo down with him.

Between himself and Shampoo they pulled the victims out of the vehicles, and got them to safety to one side, where Shampoo began to administer first aid. While the Chinese girl was busy with that, Ranma ran back, tearing the engines out of both cars before the fire could reach them.

Shampoo insisted they stay as she took care of several of the victims, all of whom had bruises and head wounds, with one of them having a nasty cut across his face that was bleeding profusely. It was evident that at least one of the cars' airbags hadn't gone off properly, and Ranma found himself and several of the other onlookers turned into gophers for Shampoo, as she barked orders to get her cloth, water and antiseptic.

It was a side of her that Ranma hadn't seen before, but Ranma found he approved of it greatly. *She might not want to be a healer as she put it full time, but she definitely has the right take-charge attitude for one.*

They stayed there for the better part of the morning, until actual help arrived in the form of police and ambulance workers, who took over from Shampoo, thanking her for her help. Without Shampoo one of the victims would have bled to death before they arrived, and the other might well have lost an eye. However, when the policeman began to ask questions about their abilities, Shampoo and Ranma decide to make tracks.

Ranma did this in his own fashion. "Look, a distraction!" he shouted, pointing towards the wreckage. Astonishing Shampoo, the police around them all turned, and by the time they turned back, Ranma and Shampoo were gone.

Again Shampoo found herself laughing as they raced across the rooftops, shaking her head. "Shampoo cannot believe that worked!"

"It's all about the tone and pointing. People automatically turned their eyes to look towards wherever someone's pointing, and if you add a surprised or scared tone to your voice, the words don't actually register. It's odd to think about, but my Pops actually had some good advice about distractions and stuff like that," Ranma opined.

Then, he looked at Shampoo, who was still giggling quietly as they ran around, leaping to another building and out over a road, still going in a generally speaking straight line out of town towards the next one over. She didn't notice at first, but as they neared the edge of the town, where the buildings turned entirely into smaller houses and businesses, she at last noticed, turning to look at him as he leaped down onto the road, still running easily. This is the kind of pace they could both keep up four hours and doing so would be good exercise. "What is it?"

"Nothing. It's just, when you were talking about you know acupuncture and herbal medicines and stuff, I honestly only saw it as an extension of martial arts. Back there though, I guess you could say I realized it was just you know another facet of your personality. I liked it," Ranma announced with a laugh.

This caused Shampoo to blush rosily, even more so than Ranma's flirting that morning. It was such an endearing thing to say, like a line right out of one of her josei novels. She reverted to Chinese as she mumbled, "Thank you," leaning into Ranma's side for a moment before pulling away.

The young couple raced on, following the road out of town before cutting across country towards Nagoya, one of the three cities famous for Sumo Wrestling in Japan.

The two of them even picked up speed as they hit the national park lands, bouncing up into the trees. Ranma began to make it a contest, patting Shampoo on the shoulder saying, "Tag you're it," before bouncing off through the foliage.

However, despite their speed, the delay dealing with the traffic accident had cost them.

The couple was able to find the place where the Street FIGHT was happening well enough. It was happening in an empty lot behind a food warehouse. The area around it was guarded by several dozen looking toughs varying from street punks to men in business suits, real professionals with watchful eyes, twitching fingers and earpieces behind their hair.

Ranma and Shampoo stared at those in particular, before simply bypassing them by taking to the rooftops, and then heading deeper inward towards the site of the fighting. There they found several fighters already making their way away from the battle, muttering incoherently to one another about their losses.

Landing near someone who was counting money as others handed it to him, Ranma gestured with his head towards the match going on. "Are we too late to join in the matches?"

The man looked over at Ranma, to taking his build and attire, before shrugging laconically. The pigtailed kid looked a little young but if he wanted to throw his life away in a street fight, well, around here that probably wasn't going to happen considering the local champion, and if he lost it might dissuade him from the future stupidity.

Not today though. "Yeah, sorry kid. But there's only so long we can keep this going without someone snitching, and street fights aren't exactly legal."

"Legal or not, they might be fun," Ranma mused, shrugging his shoulders as if that didn't matter to him at all, which it really didn't. To Ranma's mind, laws were just guidelines anyway. He moved over to Shampoo, who had pushed through the crowd by the blood of expedient of doing so, and then dealing with anyone who tried to wrap her with elbow and knee. This included one man who was now very much regretting his attempt to grab her rear, holding his thoroughly mangled hand and whimpering while his fellows dragged him away.

Standing next to her, Ranma turned his attention to the fight, gently nudging his shoulder with his own. "We can't sign up, I got the impression this is all going to break up soon, and that's the last fight of the day."

Shampoo nodded but didn't turn her attention from the fight, and Ranma hadn't either, his eyes widening even as he told Shampoo the bad news, and he slowly shook his head as he went on. "On the other hand, we might not need to. I recognize at least one of those guys."

In the center of the reading stood a massive man, easily the size of his father, with even larger shoulders. He was dressed in an odd mix of samurai helmet and facemask, and what looked like armor from Fist of the North Star. He was fast, mobile, and seems to use a mixture between boxing and an armed style that used jitte, although by this point he had lost his weapons out of the ring thanks to his opponent.

It was that opponent who Ranma knew. He had seen him in various televised sumo matches over the past three or four years, and indeed, he was something of a national celebrity. Edmond Honda, the sumo champion, Yokozuna three years running. His face was painted in a traditional manner, and was wearing his normal sumo garb, moving around the makeshift ring far more quickly and easily than someone his bulk should.

As Ranma whispered the man's identity to Shampoo, Edmond Honda ended the fight, smacking aside one of his opponents' attacks, and then ramming his palm into his opponents' chest, shouting out the traditional cry of the sumo. "Dosukoi!!!"

His opponent fell back, his defenses wide open, and Honda took advantage. A series of palm strikes lashed out, tossing the man backwards and out of the ring where he crashed to the ground, unconscious.

"Winner, Honda-sama!" shouted a voice from nowhere, and Ranma looked around quizzically, wondering where that had come from. They couldn't see anyone with a megaphone or anything, but it simply sounded loud enough to come from one.

A second later, one of the men in suits didn't pull out a megaphone, shouting into it. "All right folks, that's it for today! Let's all get out of here before the local authorities arrived to break up our fun, yeah? Pay your dues at the front if you haven't already, and remember if you try to argue, that owing us an arm and a leg for the privilege of watching isn't an exaggeration!"

Honda nodded, adding his own words of encouragement to the ground, slamming his hands together to cause a reverberation of noise that drowned out the boos and hisses from the crowd who obviously wanted to see more fights. Nudging Shampoo, Ranma gestured towards Honda, and whispered out, "Let's follow him. If nothing else, we can learn more about this whole Street FIGHT scene."

"You no think he object?" Shampoo asked quizzically.

"Nah, Honda is supposed to be a really likable guy and is touted as almost single-handedly reviving Japan's love of sumo wrestling, as well as taking it to other countries. He was the first sumo wrestler to ever accept a normal wrestling match, and the fact he won it cemented his fame. He's kind of a modern-day hero to a lot of people I guess." Ranma wasn't about to fanboy over the older man, but he acknowledged that Honda had been pretty damn important to his own branch of martial arts.

Shrugging her shoulders, Shampoo followed after Ranma. The two of them took to the rooftops quickly, leaving behind the crowd that had been watching the fight as it dispersed, waiting nearby. They watched the sumo champion leave the warehouse district, heading towards a waiting limousine of all things. The man was so heavy the limo noticeably dipped down as he got in.

The two of them exchanged glances, then Ranma shrugged, and mimed either jumping down onto the limo, or continuing over the rooftops

Shampoo signaled her agreement with the second idea, thinking that Honda would probably hear the first one. She wasn't anywhere near as silent when she landed as Ranma could be, and they didn't want to make a bad impression on the man. Soon the two of them

were racing after the limousine as it cut into and out of traffic, able to keep up with it thanks to being able to take a straight line, which allowed the two martial artists to cut off a few corners here and there, where they waited for it to catch up before darting ahead again.

Inside the limo, Edmond Honda's driver blinked as he stared out one of the side view mirrors, then very deliberately tilted the mirror upwards so much it was no longer much help in letting him see the traffic around him. Instead, he stared into it at the two people on the roof nearby, who seemed to be looking back his way. "Sir, we seem to have a tail. Two people, I can't tell ages from this far, but one of them looks female, the other male, both dressed in a non-normal fashion."

Edmond frowned from where he was reading a newspaper, setting it aside as he leaned back in his large chair at the back of the limo. The chair would normally fit three or even four people, but with his bulk, Edmond took up most of the space. "Keep going. If they attempt to attack, I'll deal with it. Until then, let's assume that they are fans of some kind."

"Fans who can leap across streets and race over rooftops?" the limo driver inquired as he saw them do that following after the limo to one side.

"That just makes it more interesting," Edmond mused.

Soon they were out of the city proper, heading up into more rarefied areas, and then further up into the mountains to where sumo wrestlers were trained. Above even that, the Yokozuna's mansion resided, which had been Edmond Honda's home for the past four years. He could have bought his own mansion someplace else, but Edmond felt that would've been discourteous to those who had gone before. Instead, he had funneled a lot of his own money into making this place even more palatial, as well as promoting sumo wrestling in general.

The two youngsters gained speed in the forest around them, something the limo giant driver dutifully reported, and when they arrived at the mansion, they both leaped down, waiting outside the walls while the gate closed behind the limo. Seeing Honda, nodding back to the driver. "See? They don't mean any harm and are certainly not enemies. Enemies would hardly be ringing the doorbell."

Edmond waited outside the limo as his driver continued on towards the garage, staring towards the gate. "Come ahead then!" he boomed. "I'm not going to have a conversation with you this far removed. And I know that wall is no real barrier."

Ranma and Shampoo glanced at one another, and Ranma laughed. "Told you so." With that, the both of them leaped up and over the wall, clearing it easily from a standing start, before racing towards Honda, coming to a halt in front of them, where both of them bowed. Ranma bowed in the Japanese manner from the waist at a full ninety-degrees, while Shampoo's bow was shallower, her hands thrust out, one palm clasping her fist.

“Well, you have manners for stalkers. Can I ask why the two of you were tailing me? And what martial arts you practice? I’ve never seen or heard of someone being able to race across rooftops as easily as the two of you apparently were,” Edmond answered, waving off their bows.

“That is actually just a kind of training for us,” Ranma said with a shrug, looking over at Shampoo, who nodded in agreement. “Anyway, my name is Ranma of the Anything Goes School of Indiscriminate Grappling, and this is Shampoo of the Joketsuzoku. We’re traveling martial artists and we’re kind of interested in the Street FIGHT circuit. I was honestly hoping to get there in enough time to have a match, but...”

“But Shampoo and Ranma, cross accident. Have to stop and help people. Make us too too late. Shampoo wondering if Honda up for a match?” She blinked as did Ranma, as the sumo wrestler’s stomach, which probably on its own weight more than Shampoo, grumbled, and she laughed. “Shampoo and Ranma willing to cook tonight, make too too delicious Chinese meal if want?”

The openness of the two youngsters and the friendliness of the pair disarmed what little concern Edmond still had about them, and he patted his stomach. “While that sounds delicious, if you two want a spar, let’s do that first. Head down that path over there, and you’ll find my personal training dojo. I’ll meet you there after I speak to my butler and get changed back into my combat garb. But I think I will take you up on that offer of Chinese. My own chef is quite brilliant, but only cook traditional Japanese food, and I would quite like some more variety. Try telling him that though, and still far you get...” Edmond grumbled.

Shampoo smiled prettily, and Edmond found himself smiling back. Ranma also pulled out a piece of paper and wrote down a list of ingredients that Shampoo rattles off quickly. She took a look at Honda, then added, “Family size for all that, Shampoo thinks.”

At that the sumo wrestler laughed, once more smacking his stomach with both hands. This caused a small booming noise before he turned away as he took the list and headed inside the mansion to hand it off to his butler.

Moments later, the limo driver was heading out in the van they used for shopping and other things, while the butler was trying to soothe the savaged ego of the chef, and Honda was heading towards the gym. He found Ranma and Shampoo there already, dancing around the room, lashing out at one another with punches and kicks, while Shampoo wielded two large chui, hollow maces of remarkable size. Edmond had always thought of them as somewhat childish, but seeing them wielded by this young girl, showed that they had potential. *And would hurt something fierce if they weren’t hollow*, he reflected as Ranma was tagged in the shoulder by one of Shampoo’s blows.

However, he turned it into a twirl in the air, bringing his foot around and down onto her shoulder in turn, sending her to her knees. A kick to the face sent her flying backwards,

although she rolled with it, Meanwhile Ranma was somehow still in the air, bouncing off of the roof and down towards her again.

Edmond laughed, slamming his hands together several times, which signaled a halt of the action. He watched as Ranma instead of attacking viciously, just sort of landed on top of one of Shampoo's Chui, her arm not even wavering as he did. That should've been impossible, of course, but Edmond took the sight in stride.

Then Ranma was hopping off of the chui landing beside the girl. He pulled Shampoo into a light hug from behind and whispering something in her ear that Honda couldn't catch before moving over to stand across from Honda in the ring.

"It's always nice to see young people take up the Art, even if it is not my style, and I can tell that the two of you have been training for a long while! I daresay either of you could have dealt with my idiot of an opponent today, or indeed any of the other three I faced." So saying Edmond kicked off his feet and took a sumo stance, looking across at Ranma, a challenging grin on his face matching the one on the youngster. "However, I think you will find that I am a bit out of your league still."

"We won't know until we try," Ranma said with a shrug, and then looked over to Shampoo, who still looked a little annoyed at having lost their small match. They'd decided to have a spar to see who would fight Honda first, whoever could land the most hits before the sumo wrestler showed up being the winner.

Ranma had beaten Shampoo out with that last kick to the face, and she was forced to acknowledge once again that Ranma was simply her better when it came to martial arts. Perhaps once she incorporated her new needle-based style, she would be able to give him a better fight, but until then, Ranma was simply faster and stronger than she could handle.

Just as my man should be! Shampoo reflected as she moved to stand to one side between the two of them. She picked up a nearby flag, holding it up in the air. "Rule is not of that of sumo, rule is simply person knocked out of ring or to the ground loses. Otherwise, anything go, yes?"

Edmond nodded. "That's always the rules in a street FIGHT. Sometimes they don't even include the whole ring out bit."

"Good to know, and yeah, I agree too." Having both of them agree to the rules was important considering that they practiced two entirely different martial arts styles. But the moment Ranma said he agreed, Shampoo lowered her arm and the flag she was holding, signaling the start of the match.

Ranma darted forward, as Honda did the same, much slower than his opponent admittedly, but with all the ponderous unstoppable nature of an avalanche. "Dosukoi, Hundred Hands Slap!" he shouted, thrusting his hands forward palm out one after another.

But to Ranma, especially after his training in Martial Arts Construction, those hands might as well have been moving at the speed of a normal person's punch. He rolled to one side, then as Honda turned, reached up and grabbed one of those arms, flipping himself up and into the air before Honda could pull back his hand.

He lashed out with a kick that took the older man in the face, and unlike when he had just been sparring with Shampoo, Ranma didn't hold back. **At all.** Honda was known for being tremendously strong, and like during his match with Ishiku, Ranma figured he didn't need to hold back.

The sumo wrestler grunted as the blow landed on his cheek, turning his head slightly, but it barely staggered him and Ranma blinked, before flipping himself higher upward, as Honda turned his hands upward as well, throwing palm strikes out faster and faster. They became a blur, to most anyway, but Ranma could still follow them, and danced on top of them, kicking out lightly and even occasionally using his own hands against Honda's, deadening the force by using it to maintain his position in the air until he kicked up further.

He then bounced up onto off of the roof, landing behind Honda. Honda tried to turn, and Ranma lashed out with several punches to his back and side, trying to land a telling punch. But even the one that crashed into the back of Honda's head barely staggered him. The man's body weight and fat, which hid quite a **lot** of muscle, basically worked as if the man was wearing several layers of armor.

A second later Ranma was forced to dodge, as Honda finished his turn, lashing out with an elbow blow from one hand. Then turning fully around, Honda charging forward once more, intent on pushing Ranma out of bounds as he was off-balance, using his knees and elbows this time.

Ranma however was not off-balance and rolled again to one side. Then, as Honda pulled back one of his palm thrust, grabbed onto the older man's arm again, flipping himself up and into the air once more, grinning down at the older man.

Edmond laughed, and thrust up with both of his arms, shouting out, "Dosukoi!" again. But Ranma once more used the momentum of his blows to leap further into the air, as he thought about what to do. *Damn, but I am glad that I put my hands through that toughness training. This guy really is as strong as Ishiku . Shampoo and I will need to make a choice soon, speed or strength, and I just don't know which will serve us better. Still, while I probably can't afford to be hit, I bet that I can still hurt him.*

“Hammer Overdrive,” Ranma murmured, once more in the air over Honda, his hands disappearing into his pockets. Ranma pulled several hammers from his ki space, tossing them down towards Honda, who smacked them out of the sky not even noticing the impacts to his palms and forearms. *So much for that idea!*

A second later though, he was on the ground to one side of Honda, his hands disappearing. “Jackhammer blow!”

Grunting in actual pain now, Honda staggered sideways, shock on his features as one of his feet left the ground under Ranma’s hundred-plus blows to his side. But then his other leg twisted and suddenly, Honda was lunging forward, trying to grab Ranma. Ranma cut out his attack, ducking away. But then the moment Honda’s foot was on the ground he once more lunged forward, hurling himself into the air. “Flying Headbutt!”

“Gah!” Ranma instinctively leaped up as well, but when he tried to attack from a superior position – above – Honda’s flying form, his blows bounced off the rapidly twirling sumo. A second later, Honda’s brief flight ended as he skidded to a halt whirling around his hand reaching to grab Ranma again, who barely dodged out of the way, halting his charge to take advantage of Honda’s position by the edge of the ring.

Dancing backwards, Ranma thought about some of the more esoteric styles he’d learned. *Damn, I really can’t get through his mix o’ fat and muscles! Not easily. I could go for the legs, but he is way faster than you’d think with his bulk. Still, unless I want to go for the eyes or throat, his knees might be the only target I got. And even then, I don’t know how quickly he could heal if I hurt his knee. But he’s too damn tough for anything less.*

Meanwhile, Honda realized the opposite of that equation. Pausing, Honda allowed his hands to fall to the side, signaling a pause in the match. “I think this is a match between the wind and the mountain. The mountain cannot really harm the wind, but neither can the mountain be eroded so quickly by the wind. You’re not strong enough to get through my toughness in any meaningful manner without hurting me more permanently than either of us would like, and I’m not fast enough to catch you. I’d be willing to keep trying to see which of us has more endurance, but honestly, I don’t see either of us learning anything from this match. What do you think?”

For a moment, Ranma’s training under Genma rebelled. He could see a way to win this fight, he could! *But doing that would cost me more in the long run. I ain’t willing to try and cripple the guy, not in a friendly match.*

With that in mind, he nodded. “We really weren’t looking to try and beat you, really. We, Shampoo and me, we wanted to see where we stood in the Street Fighter circuit, and I think we understand that now.” He looked over at Shampoo, shrugging his shoulders. “Honda’s right, I’m not going to get much out of this. Unless he gets really lucky there’s no way he can tag me and my punches just aren’t doing anything even at full strength.”

Honda nodded sternly. "It would be very different if we were fighting to the death, but this was a friendly match, not a real battle." He then winked at Ranma. "And you young man would be astonished at how hard you would find it to aim for my legs. I barely used knee jabs at all, after all."

"Hah!" Ranma snorted, moving forward to bow formally to Honda, who returned the gesture. "You're probably right about that." *And if I was stupid enough to let him hit anything but my hands, I think I'd be the one losing. Shampoo and I really need to look into that toughness training idea.*

Shampoo nodded agreement and looked over at Honda, asking politely if he was still up for a match with her. Moving that massive bulk as fast as Honda did had to take it out of the man, no matter how strong he was. And he'd had matches earlier that day.

But Honda simply waved a hand, indicating she should take Ranma's place. None of the matches today had been very difficult, and Edmond Honda knew it was time for him to get back out on the circuit if you wanted to face anyone really worth the challenge.

That thought changed rapidly however as the match started, and Shampoo smacked one of his palm strikes aside as she rolled to one side, moving faster than he could keep up with just like Ranma. And unlike Ranma, those maces could hurt. *What in the heck!? That hurt! Good grief, and I thought Ranma's strength and speed was a surprise.*

He leaped to the side and away from Shampoo dodging a blow from one of them that could well have taken his legs out, and to the side he heard Ranma chuckle. "Damn it, I knew the legs were a good target. So much for not finding it easy to attack them huh, Yokozuna?"

Shampoo answered tartly, never taking her eyes off her opponent. "Indeed, Ranma think that up too too slowly. Sometimes better to remain on the ground, you know?"

"Bite your tongue!" Ranma retorted, and Shampoo laughed even as Honda charged her. "Body Slide!"

The move sent Honda forward in a charge along the ground, lowering his center of mass and protecting his legs. Contrary to her previous comment, Shampoo, took to the air just as easily as Ranma had to avoid it, thrusting down with her large chui, which crashed into Honda's arm and side, even as she flipped over him.

They turned to face one another, but Honda was noticeably wary now. "Those are not hollow, are they?"

"Course not! What use hollow chui be?" Shampoo retorted, shaking her head as if the very idea was hilarious.

Edmond's grimace increased at that, and he reflected that this match was going to bruise pretty badly.

However, Shampoo was not nearly as mobile as Ranma was. Eventually she made a mistake, and Honda, sporting several bruises on his arms and more on his chest and thighs, finally caught her with a elbow blow that lifted the girl up off of her feet. In midair, she tried to flip, but couldn't dodge a palm strike from the side. The blow slammed into her forearm dislodging her weapon, even as it sent her tumbling with a cry.

The next second she looked up, and Edmond was in the air, twirling as he headed towards her. "Flying Headbutt!"

Shampoo was able to roll out of the way, but Honda landed perfectly, flipped, turned, and was within palm range before she could move. "Hundred Hand Slap!" Several strikes landed, hurling Shampoo backward and out of the ring, to roll into the wall, where she lay for a moment, before thumping the ground with one fist and pushing herself to her feet.

Ranma was there instantly, helping her to her feet, looking at Shampoo solicitously. "You all right, Shampoo?"

"Shampoo feel very happy that Ranma beat her first, but also very sore," Shampoo admitted, leaning up to kiss his cheek, and happily leaning against his side as Ranma put in arm around her. She looked back towards Honda and bowed formally as Ranma did the same once more, this time with Shampoo using the Japanese style bow.

Edmond acknowledged the bows, looking at the two of them with appreciation. They'd given him two very fun fights, and he felt all three of them had learned something today. Ranma had learned he needed to up his durability across his entire body and work on his striking power, while Shampoo needed to work more on speed and accuracy with her chui. In turn, Honda learned he needed to work on pulling his strikes back faster, defending from above, and, astonishingly, his durability.

The older man was about to comment on that, when his stomach roared like a lion the size of an elephant, filling the training hall from one side to another. As the echoes still bounced off the walls it was answered by Ranma's, and Shampoo began to giggle, shaking her head. "We talk more over food, yes?"

The two men answered in the affirmative. About forty-five minutes later, Edmond, now freshly showered and in a robe, sat down at his table as Ranma and Shampoo began to bring out Chinese type dishes from the nearby kitchen.

The conversation that followed was just as agreeable to all three as the previous matches. Honda told Shampoo and Ranma about the Street FIGHT scenes, which was a tournament that was being held worldwide. Each nation seemed to have at least four roving

groups that organized matches, and which kept up with the leaderboard, such as it was. Who had organized the whole thing Honda didn't know but it was about as honest as something inherently illegal could be. While people had died in the tournament, that was an exception, not the rule. As far as Honda knew, it was being organized by rich fighters themselves, rather than the underworld, although he doubted that organized crime was entirely removed from the monetary side of the events.

But beyond the Street FIGHT tournament, there were rumors of new, far more aboveboard tournament starting up soon. "Or rather, once again. King of Fighters is historically just as serious as Street FIGHT, but it hasn't been around for more than fifteen years. Unlike the former though, I know precisely who's funding KoF, and while a few of them aren't people I'd have over for tea, their love of a good battle and the Art is something I can trust."

"Would it be anyone we know?"

"Rugal Bernstein and Geese Howard," Edmond supplied, but saw no flicker of recognition. "Very reclusive, very old-money rich Europeans, who practice the Art to a very high degree and demand that of others. They are also heirs to fortunes that may or may not have been... enhanced by ill-gotten Nazi gold. And who spout a very survival of the fittest mindset,

Both his listeners tsked at that, and the sumo wrestler nodded. "See what I mean about not being people I would have over for tea?" He waited until the youngsters nodded, then went on, "If you want to be involved, you have a due date to submit your name. Once you do, you will be challenged to one-on-one matches, as well as team matches occasionally via text messages, which include local information as to where to go for the match, rules and so forth."

"That does sound like fun," Ranma reflected. "When is the cutoff for that?"

"Next summer, officially. Unofficially, I know that the Street FIGHT scene is being used as a kind of training ground for people who are going to sign up for it. I don't know the connection between the two, and I worry that there is something more going on behind the Street FIGHT scene but haven't yet heard back from my various government contacts. So for now, I am simply taking part on my own. As for King of Fighters..." Edmond looked at the two of them speculatively. "I don't suppose if it occurs that the two of you would like to join a team with me?"

"We love to," Shampoo replied for them both quickly, causing Ranma to look at her, but he nodded in agreement anyway. "Better to have team of friends, who trust can watch back, then people who simply strong, yes?"

"My thoughts exactly," Edmond answered, lifting a sake cup to her, having noted that neither of them drank, which he approved of given their ages. "But tell me, what are you going to do now?"

“I think we’re going to take a break from traveling for a bit. There’s a few parks near here, we’ll set up in one of them, and put ourselves through a few training styles. My hands went through toughness training recently, and I think we need both of us to put ourselves through the full body version. Whenever you landed a punch, it mattered a hell of a lot more than when even Shampoo did the same with her chui. That, strength training, and speed training. Basically, we’ve both gotten our styles up to where I’m comfortable we can hold our own in terms of skill but not basic physical ability.”

Shampoo nodded, although she wasn’t as sanguine on the skill thing as Ranma was. “You show we have long way to go. But we keep growing, yes?”

Edmond nodded agreement at that, although internally, he was wondering how quickly the two of them would learn that kind of thing. They were already almost his equal already and as Ranma said, their disparate styles were extremely good. Still, while he loved Sumo, Edmond knew that it took a lot of skill to adapt it and limited his abilities against many of the opponents he’d heard about through the Street FIGHT scene. So maybe they were right.

The talk diverted from there to more general things. Edmond told them a bit about the area, and listened intently to their stories about their travels, laughing raucously at some of their stories, and, making a note to look up this construction crew. This Ishiku fellow sounded interesting, and while Edmond knew himself to be immensely tough already, there was no reason not to take some more endurance training. Especially not after the battering that Shampoo had given him.

They kept talking until the sun began to set and the two wandering Martial Artists decided it was time to go. As they were leaving, Ranma leaned over, asking Shampoo, “Would it be all right roughing it in the forest for a week or so while we train. I mean, we could probably come back into town if you want.”

“Is Ranma tried to be insulting? Shampoo is Amazon, well used to being out in the wild. Besides,” she smiled, her tart tone disappearing as she leaned up to kiss his cheek as she switched to Chinese, “roughing it also give us more time together. Without somewhat romantic but inquisitive construction folk, or other interruptions like Kodachi and her ribbon.”

Ranma stared at her, holding up a finger, which segued into a slap to his forehead. “While I agree, why did you have to tempt fate like that? Why?”

Shampoo made to open her mouth to argue back that she had done no such thing, but reviewing her words, she suddenly slumped, nodding her head thoughtfully in agreement. “We screwed, yes?”

“To be interrupted somehow? Definitely. Still, that won’t stop us training or having fun, will it?” Shampoo shook her head firmly, and the two of them moved off, walking now as they

made plans, pouring over a map of the area. Whatever chaos fate was going to throw their way, and both of them were certain it would happen, training came first.

End Chapter

Chapter 3: Rope Burns

Ranma stared up at the contraption that he and Shampoo had put together. To one side was a small one-story platform, almost like something from a treehouse they had made between two of an oak tree's branches. Above this was a Bungee cord connected to what looked like a straightjacket... and was. Ranma had found it in a joke shop in town. If someone was placed into the straight jacket, they could then be swung out into the open air.

To one side of this, facing it at a right angle, was a much larger tree with only a few large branches where a large boulder was held in place by a net attached to a thick hawser. Staring at it, anyone could see that it could be released to swing around like a massive flail.

"...All finished like this, it reminds me of something I saw once in a book about siege weapons. That probably shoulda occurred to one of us before this, really," Ranma mumbled looking askance at his companion. "Er... Shampoo, you sure this will work?"

Shampoo scoffed, waving his concerns away with one hand, although from her expression, Ranma could also tell that she was feeling a bit of trepidation, and the fact she spoke Chinese rather than Japanese was another indication. "It will work! This setup is precisely what I saw the older warriors using, except without the Bungee cords and the wire netting around the boulder. It will work... I just don't know how painful it's going to be."

She shook herself then flung one arm around Ranma's waist, hugging him. "But as the Americans are supposed to have said first, no pain no gain, right?"

"Hah! I doubt they can really take credit for that though, they seem ta try and take credit for most things," Ranma snickered, throwing an arm around Shampoo's shoulders, kissing her cheek. Now nearly a month into traveling and being in a relationship with Shampoo, Ranma was almost used to the Chinese girl's spontaneous displays of affection and was more than willing to respond. Especially when they were alone like this.

But there would be time enough for romance-stuff when it got too dark to train, and there was an important question to be answered right now. "So, who goes first?"

Shampoo looked up at Ranma, then shrugged her shoulders a bit, holding her hand up in a loose fist. "Jiǎndāo shítou bù (Rock paper scissors)?"

"Sure, but are we playing to see who goes first or doesn't?" Ranma quipped, causing Shampoo to laugh, but eventually, it was decided to play for who would go first.

The two of them exchanged wins for a time, although Shampoo tried to use her chest a bit to distract Ranma, something that Ranma didn't notice, much to her annoyance. *Hmph! I need to look into a better wardrobe. Making out and feeling up one another over our clothing is nice, but I want something more soon, darn it.*

However, she still won best four out of five, and moments later, Ranma was helping her into the straitjacket, while Shampoo tried to psych herself up, muttering to herself in Chinese. "Right, I can do this. I'm the one that thought this up. It'll work. This training is really important if we want to be able to tank blows from someone, even like Honda. We need this. I can do this!"

When Shampoo was secured, Ranma pushed her off the platform, watching as she swung through the air a few times before stopping. That was the easy part.

Ranma hopped over to the other tree, where he found the release catch, they had made holding the Boulder in place. "Ready?"

Shampoo was now having second thoughts about all this, but she was an Amazon warrior and refused to show fear. Indeed, she tried to make a joke of it, saying, "Ready, but if Ranma say something like this hurting Ranma more than Shampoo, Shampoo will punch Ranma in boy bitsSSSSS!"

Her voice rose into a shriek as the large boulder came towards her, and a second later, the boulders smacked fully into her. the momentum of the impact pushed her away as the boulder finished its swing while Ranma pulled it back into position. "Why would I say that? Seriously, that line sounds really stupid. Is it from one of those shoujo mangas ya read? If so, it's proof they rot your brain."

Groaning, Shampoo shook her head as Ranma used another rope to pull the boulder back. "Nevermind."

Ranma shrugged. "If you say so." With that, he released the boulder again, making Shampoo wonder if this training could be called spousal abuse before it crashed into her.

Each blow after that rattled her insides and caused Shampoo to groan in agony. Sometimes it hit her side, sometimes her back depending on how Shampoo twirled in the air. But any thought of this being a quick-fix type of training faded after the fifth shot. If anything, the blows were hurting more, smacking into Shampoo's already sore body.

She got her revenge though later that day when after twenty iterations of the boulder versus Amazon fight, the two switched out, and Shampoo made certain that his arms were tied tightly to his side, in the straitjacket as Ranma had just pointed out he could probably shatter boulder like that into rubble if he wanted.

"That be cheating," Shampoo caroled when Ranma complained about how tight she was tying him. "Remember, purpose of training is to become tougher. Not just smash boulder."

"I still say there's something fishy about this, but..." Ranma shrugged, winking at her and kicking off the platform himself before she could push him even as he kept speaking. "Since you went through the training, I suppose I have to too, you know?"

Alas, the two teenagers should have thought about this idea through in greater detail because, by the time Ranma was done, Shampoo's muscles had mostly seized up. The continued blows to her entire body had battered her so much Shampoo could barely pull the rock back into place, let alone release Ranma from his ropes.

Seeing his girlfriend's distress, Ranma somehow got free on his own and moved over to help her out of the tree. But by the time they had moved back to their camp nearby, neither of them were willing to move around to do anything bar laying down. They went to bed hungry that night and accordingly planned out the next day somewhat better.

Three days of self-torture followed, and as Ranma woke up on the third day, he scowled as he worked on breakfast. "I gotta wonder if we're doing something wrong. Maybe splitting time in the device like we have is messing with its effectiveness? Or are we just wrong on how long it takes to get results? Because I gotta tell ya, the pain of getting smacked around is not going away."

Shampoo shrugged, groaned and made no move to get up from her sleeping bag. They had made a point of buying better sleeping bags after they left Honda's place, and the softness of the built-in pillow under her head proved that to have been a very good move. "Shampoo not know, unfortunately, but all for taking day off. Shampoo has bruises on her bruises."

Ranma looked down at himself, then shrugged. "I don't, but I feel as if someone tried to pound me into the dough for a pizza."

"Shampoo wondering if maybe she should contact grandmother," she mused aloud. "She would know how to do the technique correctly." But she looked at Ranma and shook her head, a teasing yet serious look entering her eyes. "Probably wouldn't like me teaching outsider. But if Shampoo tell Grandmother we married..."

"None of that," Ranma quickly answered, ruffling her hair. "Nope. We're just dating. You know that whole kiss-and-you're-married thing bothers the heck out of me. We'll switch to full days and see if that helps."

Despite the head pat, Shampoo pouted, still firmly of the feeling that they were indeed married, whatever Ranma said. Still, she understood he was uncomfortable with jumping straight to being married, and after reading so many girl's mangas, she understood why and could allow him his delusions on that score. *He's not protesting our relationship, after all, just*

being married instead of just dating. And he's getting better at being affectionate, so I can deal with that.

Another two days followed, with both of them a little annoyed at the training and the consequences. Their dinners remained very haphazard affairs, both of them just too sore to do anything but crawl into their sleeping bags. For another, this soreness sharply curtailed their cuddle time. Ranma tried once to make out with Shampoo, but just touching one another with anything but their lips was enough to cause them both flashes of pain.

Even kissing became hard after Ranma 'accidentally' attempted to headbutt the boulder. Not only did it not destroy the boulder as he had hoped, but his face remained sorer than the rest of his body the next day.

On the tenth of their toughness training, Ranma left a quietly groaning Shampoo behind and headed into town, reflecting that the switch to full days-on training seemed to work, but slowly. Certainly, he wasn't feeling it as much today as he had the first day of training. Shampoo also didn't seem to be as bad off as she had been, although she still refused to move that morning.

I just think she's a little lazy feeling a little lazy. Not that I can blame her. It's time for a day off, for certain.

Regardless of Shampoo's overall health, Ranma felt up to cooking something today, rather than simply digging out some beef jerky or other snack thing for dinner. And he wanted to make the most of it.

With that in mind, Ranma headed into town, where he found a good deal on some fish and purchased a new container of various spices and sauces. With that done, Ranma was about to leave town when some laughter from a group of men sitting outside a dojo caught his attention.

The place didn't teach what Ranma considered a real martial arts style, only teaching basic Judo. He had challenged the dojo master for some money the day after leaving Honda's place since they needed money for the various bits of equipment that went into the toughness training device. Still, the man had taken it relatively well and had helped Ranma find deals on the supplies he needed. He seemed a man who was well connected like that, and seeing him talking to a few other older people dressed in martial arts gis grabbed Ranma's attention. He slowed down, listening intently from behind a nearby corner.

"Sado-style Hotojutsu?" Hahaha, that sounds more like a fetish, not a martial arts style."

As Ranma closed, one of the other men spoke up, moving his hands randomly. "A young stevedore interrupted a bar fight by knocking out all of the participants in seconds. I still have nightmares of that knotted rope coming towards my head, only to stop an inch away from my

face, then flip away to smash someone else when the user realized I wasn't part of the fight. It was a show of control that I've never seen with any chain-type weapon. Just think about what you could do with something more serious, a meteor hammer or something similar."

"And you say they used the rope to block a knife strike? And the rope didn't fray or anything? Must've been a very dull knife then," the local master, whose name Ranma might have heard but no longer remembered, replied. He wasn't visibly scoffing, but he obviously didn't believe his companion either.

"The young woman in question..."

The speaker was interrupted by hoots of derision, but he growled back, "Yes, she was a young woman and a stevedore, you bastards. This is modern times. Any woman can do any job they want. So long as they don't care about marriage anyway," he added, causing the other men there to snort in agreement.

Nearby, Ranma rolled his eyes at that, shaking his head. *Eesh, and I thought my old man's view on women was a bit old-fashioned. This is making his opinion seem normal.*

"Anyway, the knife was more a machete than anything else, no idea how the asshole got it into the bar. He'd had already cut a wooden chair leg that one of the other fighters was using, sliced it clear down to his handhold before kicking his legs out from under him. But the young stevedore blocked it with the rope, bound the man's hands with a flick of his weapon, and hurled him aside. And then he was still using his rope weapon. I think it was a Surujin, a second later. And get this, the man was still bound, but the weapon didn't look any shorter!"

"Now I know you were in your cups too much!" the local scoffed. "That's some kind of ki ability you're talking about, and that's an old wives tale if ever there was one..."

At that point, the conversation was interrupted by an irate female voice going, "What was that about old wives!?"

Hearing that, Ranma took the opportunity to leave unnoticed as the man tried to explain what he had really been saying to the irate middle-aged woman who had come out of the dojo behind him. Ranma recognized her as the lady of the place and someone who had a rather cutting tongue and had no desire to stay around. *Sado Island, huh? If nothing else, if this school can teach how to impart ki into a weapon, that alone would make it a style I'd want to look into. Still, Sado Island is back the way we came. Heck it's across from Niigata, right?*

Ranma was still trying to remember his geography, as he turned his feet towards leaving town. But as he did, something caught his eye, and he slowed down, hopping down to stare at a poster on a lamppost.

"Wanted for petty theft, drunk and disorderly conduct. Yes, we really mean it," Ranma read, staring at the mug shot of a panda on the poster for a second before groaning, slapping his forehead. He then looked around quickly, ducking into an alleyway, debating whether or not he should take to the rooftops again or keep to the alleyways.

Deciding to stay with the alleyways, Ranma moved over into a nearby alleyway, where he found himself accosted almost at once by a few toughs. "Oy, who do ya think you are walking through ouCCCH!!"

Ranma lazily slapped the man wielding a small knife on the wrist, deadening his hand before grabbing him by the arm and tossing him into his two fellows. Since they all looked Ranma's age, he figured that was enough for now. "Word to the wise, guys, don't just attack random people. You might catch a tiger by the tail."

With that, he was off, moving through the backstreets of the town, doubling back to try to throw off anyone who might've spotted him. But this time, Ranma's luck evading his father ran out.

The first he knew of this was a street sign flashing towards his head from behind. Ranma grunted under the impact as he was hurled sideways into a wall, the 'GOOONG!' sound making him feel a strange moment of *déjà vu*, recalling how his father had knocked him out before arriving at the Tendo place.

But unlike that time, Ranma wasn't knocked out, and coming away from the wall, he rolled to one side to avoid a punch from his father, who was not currently in his panda form. *Not that there's much of a difference there, although I suppose his human form isn't nearly as likely to cause a riot given that wanted poster.* "Dammit, Pops, why can't ya get a freaking clue, huh?!"

"Boy, you have spent more than long enough with that gaijin tart of yours! It's now time to come back and do your duty for the school!" With that, the older man charged forwards.

"Ugh, really, now with the racial slurs." Scrambling to his feet, Ranma barely had time to set himself before his father was on him. Ranma redirected two blows before he leaped up into the air. His father followed, and the two of them traded punches and kicks. Ranma overextended very slightly, which his father took advantage of, grabbing his leg and hurling him into the ground.

At that point, Soun made an appearance, lashing down at Ranma with a polearm, the end of it marked by a small bag full of sand or something similar. This was the kind of weapon that police would use in ancient times to knock out perps without hurting them much.

But Ranma rolled as he hit the ground, and when the staff came towards him, he grabbed it with one hand, pulling the other man in. This put Soun in the way of Genma.

Sweeping to one side, Ranma's foot caught Genma's leg, upending him before Ranma lashed out with an equally fast uppercut.

Genma grunted but also moved with the punch, flipping in the air and lashing out with his own kicks, which Ranma blocked, while Soun pressed in, his staff lashing out. "Come now, son. You surely can't be enjoying going around everywhere with that Chinese girl as much as you would having a real roof over your head and real meals and spending time with your fiancée!?"

A kick shattered Soun's staff, and Ranma grabbed its end, slamming the other end into the older man's jaw as he leaped into the air. "In case you forgot Weeps-a-lot, your daughter ended our relationship! As far as I'm concerned, that ends any honor agreement I might've been caught up in thanks to you and my old man being morons!"

"Soun has two other daughters you could get married too, you know!" Genma grunted. He had already leaped upwards and now had the height advantage. He launched a series of attacks from above Ranma, trying to pin him in place between himself and his friend.

"Heh, I note ya didn't mention how you and Weeps-a-lot are morons. Does that mean ya agree with me?" Ranma taunted before pushing off a block from one blow from Genma. Instead of continuing to fight, he darted away, fleeing down an alleyway between two restaurants.

Both older men chased after him, only for Ranma to lash out with a kick to the side of a trash compactor, sending it towards Soun and Genma. While Genma leaped up over the compactor, Soun couldn't dodge and was barely able to get up his arms up in time to block. The compactor crashed into him, sending the mustachioed man flying across the street.

Genma landed, and reached for his son, shouting out, "Oh, what dishonor you have brought to our name, what did I ever do to deserve a son like you, who would run from his obligations like you did, and now fight to not be brought back to answer for them?"

"Oh, you're so full of crap, Pops! I told ya, Akane ended the agreement between our families. I gave it a nice try, but that's it!" Ranma grabbed his outstretched arm and lashed out with a series of kicks to his stomach. Ranma then flipped himself up words, grabbing the emergency stairwell above, flipping himself up further as his old man made to follow. "And besides, judging by how weak your friend is, do you honestly think he has anything to offer?"

Growling, Genma leaped up to the rooftop, showing his strength by making it in one leap, whereas Ranma had needed to pause halfway up. But as he cleared the rooftop, Genma was forced to block a thrown pottery plant that Ranma had picked up on a windowsill on his way up. He was able to, but the dirt got in Genma's eyes just long enough for Ranma to close.

Several punches landed on Genma's stomach before he could defend himself, causing the older man to grunt in pain. *The boy's gotten stronger, blast it!* At this point, Genma was very worried that Ranma was too strong for him to control, even if he could beat the boy down.

Then Ranma was above him, legs and feet hammering into Genma's shoulders and face. But Genma was made of sterner stuff than his friend and took the punishment, lashing out with his own series of punches while trying hard to get into the air himself. But once more, Ranma retreated rather than getting drawn into a drag-out fight.

"Gotta catch me, Pops!" Ranma taunted, hoping to get his father angry enough to make a mistake. It didn't work, and the old man gradually pushed him backward. Ranma leaped to another rooftop, and the two Saotomes continued to fight, moving across the rooftops until Ranma got a break.

He saw a building that he knew was being readied for demolition and moved the fight in that direction. Lighting down at the edge of a nearby building, he rolled forward, slipping under his father's charge, before jumping across to that rooftop. As he did, he stumbled to all fours, smacking his hands down on the top of the roof. As he did, he whispered. "Martial Arts construction technique, Nail Hell."

Seeing his son down, Genma leaped forward, landing on the same roof and lashing out at him just as the nails from all around the roof flew upwards. The ones nearby smacked into Ranma, but in the first sign that maybe the durability training was working, if not as fast as they had hoped. The nails just bounced off him, with Ranma barely noticing.

Genma wasn't so lucky, with several of the nails slamming into his legs, feet and outthrust arm. Genma was one heck of a touch character regardless of his current body, so the nails didn't penetrate, but they certainly stung like blazes causing his attack to falter as he landed.

And then the roof, already weakened, and now without nails connecting the boards to one another, collapsed under Genma. "OUCH, boy w, whhWAHHH!"

Knowing he had to keep up the pressure, Ranma followed up, leaping into the hole. With his father thrown off balance, he got the upper hand again, a series of punches getting through the older man's defenses into his face even as he fell towards the next floor.

Genma beat Ranma off eventually, even as he landed on the next floor down. Ranma then shifted his target, shouting out, "Martial Arts Construction, Shattering Punch, and..."

The punch Ranma landed didn't go through the floor at that one point, instead once more the strike released energy into the surrounding area a trick he really wanted to use in a broader setting than just through construction materials. And this time, instead of the nails being forced out of the wood, the wood in a wide area disintegrated.

This sent Genma falling forward into the hole once more. "Agaiinnn!"

"Suck it, Old Man, Jackhammer landing!" Before Genma could do anything, Ranma came down on him, feet first. All of his weight hammered against the back of Genma's head, and then he began to stomp, his feet moving so fast they would have seemed a blur to anyone normal there. It wasn't quite as fast as the technique should have been, Ranma just hadn't been able to put either his feet or his hands through the training needed yet. But the modified jackhammer attack was enough. Genma's eyes rolled up in his head as he crashed into the first floor of the building.

Hopping upward, Ranma grabbed onto the side of the second hole he'd made, flipping himself upward to land on a rooftop nearby. "And now to make sure you stay put old man. Martial Arts Construction, Safe Demolition."

With that, Ranma raced around the house hands lashing out at specific points at the corners before darting inside through the broken door, striking several of the support beams. When he ran outside, the whole building collapsed inwards, burying Genma within. "WOOOT!" Ranma whooped. "Who knew that time Master Ishiku dragged me and Shampoo to a demolition job just to have us prepare food for the rest of 'em would pay off."

Just then sirens in the distance began, and Ranma winced. "A, yep, time for this guy to exit, stage right." With that Ranma raced off, hoping that the building now sealing his old man in would hold long enough to give him and Shampoo a head start. *I doubt it though. I've seen him get hit by boulders larger than that house.*

Ranma nearly stumbled then as he leaped from one building to another, the realization of what that meant hitting him. "Oh damn that bastard, he's been holding out on me!" *That tears it, that Hotojutsu style is going to give me the skills necessary to hogtie that old fart and deliver him right to the nearest freaking zoo!*

Away from the scene of his fight with his old man, Ranma another thought brought on a scowl as he remembered that the attack had cost him the food he'd bought. *Damn it!* Then he grimaced as his knee twinged on landing. That reminded him he had taken a few hits from his old man and noticing a few bruises he winced. "He might not be quite as strong as Honda-san, but he's way closer to it than I am. I'm going to be bruised for the rest of the day. That's proof that we really are doing something wrong with this toughness training thing."

Shaking his head at that, Ranma continued on his way over the rooftops. "I can still outsmart him, thanks to my new skills, but still...I think we've overstayed our welcome here. Time to pack up and move on," he grumbled.

Despite leaving both older men unconscious behind him, Ranma still double-backed and took to the side streets several times. Then he left the town in a different direction from the national park he and Shampoo had set up shop in before circling back.

This took some time, and Shampoo was frowning as he arrived. "What took you so long?" Shampoo asked, showing a marked improvement in her Japanese as she frowned at Ranma, noticing the lack of bags. "And where is the food you went to buy?"

"Heh, well, I spotted a wanted poster for my old man. Would you believe it was panda form?"

"Shampoo now really in favor of the beat him until he gets the idea plan," Shampoo interrupted.

"Yeah, well, I just did that. Pops and his friend Weeps-a-lot caught me before I could get out of town. I managed to beat them both, but I doubt it'll take." Ranma snorted. "Still Soun's showing made me certain I made the right decision to leave Nerima. The guy's pathetic. I could probably beat him with both arms tied behind my back."

Shampoo snickered at that, although a part of her was annoyed Ranma hadn't mentioned that leaving had allowed them to travel together. *Grr, no wait, Shampoo, you knew Ranma's priorities before you got together. You knew that getting stronger was part of why Ranma wanted to leave, and the rest was getting away from his father. Your budding relationship, no matter the laws of the tribe, was a secondary concern.*

"Anyway, I think we need to get out of here," Ranma went on, unaware of Shampoo's inner annoyance. "Beaten or not, Pops is tricky, and I wager that he be willing to play really dirty get me back under his thumb. Pops was really set on me taking over the Tendo dojo for some reason, going on and on about honor this that."

"Shampoo a little annoyed at the need," Shampoo answered, her accent coming back as she responded. "But understands. We not getting very far with toughness training anyway. Think switching off days takes too much impact away."

"Yeah, I think the same thing. Still, live and learn. Anyway, I thought we should try to throw them off again. If we take to the sea for a bit and instead of continuing south, head back north, we should throw my Old Man's nose off the scent."

Shampoo cocked her head and then shrugged. "That make sense throwing off Weepy and Growly. But what train? Shampoo thought plan was keep head south then to Hong Kong before moving along coast."

"That's actually another point in favor of heading back north," Ranma answered, grinning as he clapped his hands together. "You see, I heard about a Hotojutsu style being taught on Sado Island."

"Shampoo knows Hotojutsu, rope javelin and other things like that. Good for midrange fighting, but Shampoo not so good with that kind of thing," the Chinese Amazon admitted.

“Maybe not, but this could be a good place to get better. And the talk about them mentioned some things that could only be explained by the use of ki.” Ranma explained what he had overheard.

Shampoo thought doing this on account of rumors was a bit weak, but if this school could really tell her how to push ki into her weapons, that would be a major benefit. She hopped to her feet before groaning in pain at the sudden movement, yet still excited at the training on offer. “Ooh, then what we waiting for?”

As she recovered, Ranma moved around the camp, policing the area, packing their stuff into their bags, before placing his own and Shampoo’s bag on his shoulders. “You can take it easy until we get to the coastline, Shampoo. Sorry, but I ain’t gonna swim with you on my back.”

For several reasons, the pig-tailed martial artist reflected, blushing at the idea, which Shampoo saw. That response brought a smile to her face, even as she admitted that her bathing suit wasn’t anything to get happy at.

It took them the better part of the night and a good portion of the morning to cross from near Nagoya to the other side of Japan. There, they had found a small beach, where the two of them had separated into different changing areas. But staring out over the ocean, Shampoo’s interest in the plan disappeared as she had to face the fact of actually going through with swimming north until they reached Sado island, a trip that would have taken them mere hours if they used the train to get to Niigata. “Shampoo having second thoughts now. She think this is crazy... and that Ranma’s swimsuit be too too ugly,” she added, glancing sideways at her companion.

Now in his female form for obvious reasons, Ranma wore a school swimsuit, a one-piece suit that was about as un-sexy as Ranma could make it. “Bah, I told you about Kuno, remember? Why the heck would I get a sexy swimsuit when I didn’t want to attract further attention, huh? Besides, yours isn’t any better.”

Pouting, Shampoo had to admit that. While she was technically wearing a swimsuit, it was really just a two-piece version of traditional pearl divers. It wasn’t the most flattering garb, but Shampoo’s body was such that Ranma and indeed many of the boys around them, were having trouble taking their eyes off the Chinese girl, particularly the curves of her thigh, rear and chest, which oddly enough were all covered but still very visible.

Seeing Ranma’s eyes unable to leave her caused her to snicker. “Then Shampoo think both need swimsuits, yes?” Reaching over and uncaring the audience around them, Shampoo touched Ranma’s cheek, trailing her finger down to the redhead’s neck. “If Ranma good, maybe Shampoo model few, hmmm?”

Trying to keep her blush down, Ranma nodded. "Er, I ain't really good about fashion if ya want my opinion, but I guess I can do that. Er, for now, though, let's get into the water." Still blushing and moving like an automaton, Ranma headed to the water, still carrying their bags, now stuffed into a water-tight bag nearly as large as she was in male form, the bag tied to one wrist by a long string. That bag had used up most of their remaining cash, but neither martial artist was concerned. There were always idiots to fleece, after all.

Snickering, Shampoo followed, ignoring the looks of the people around them and the attempt of one heavily tanned young man to flirt with her. As she entered the water, he tried to follow, but Shampoo had recovered somewhat from the toughness training and dove through the water after Ranma, who was already well away from the shore. The flirtatious youth tried to keep up with them for a few minutes, but the two martial artists quickly left him well behind as they traveled north, keeping the land in sight as they did.

The two of them swam for several hours before putting in to shore for a rest. Ranma had a nosebleed there, seeing how Shampoo's clothing was nearly see-through and now clung to every curve she had like a second skin.

Seeing that, Shampoo smiled and pulled the redhead into a kiss. She didn't deepen it, though, knowing that Ranma was not comfortable being kissed like this in his female body just yet. *Still, Ranma's kissing back quicker in this form now. That's a good thing*, she reflected, pulling back and letting Ranma look around for some wood to make a fire.

The small rocky beach they had gone ashore on was unused, and the two of them found a small cave to spend the night in, moving on early the next day. Even so, it was late afternoon by the time they made shore on Sado Island.

This meant that there weren't as many people on the beach, where they came out of the water, which made this process far easier than it might have been. It was a nice place, and Ranma had some trouble finding an out-of-the-way area to transform back to his male body.

As he rejoined her, Shampoo, who had changed back to her normal outfit, smiled, winking at Ranma and linking arms with him, saying, "Shampoo like Ranma regardless of form, but like looking up into his face much better, yes? Though she also wonder why Master Ishiku not know about this Hotojutsu school if it be on this island. It what, hour trip by boat to Niigata?"

"Ehh, I don't think it's so unusual. Remember that I only heard about it from listening in on a conversation between one of the local fakers and a few of his buddies who had traveled around. That's the way word about martial arts styles travels, and I don't think Master Ishiku was a very friendly guy. And remember all the trouble we were running into fakers ourselves."

Shampoo had to agree with that point. *And the more fantastical a style sounds, the more people will believe the stories exaggerated*, she thought. "Then we need be careful ourselves, yes?"

"Yeah. Seeing how late it is, let's look around for a hotel or someplace to set up camp without getting in trouble with the locals. We can start asking questions about any local Hotojutsu school, but I doubt we'll find anything tonight."

Leaving the beach and the boardwalk area behind, Ranma and Shampoo headed deeper into Sado the city. Alas, the first few hotels they found were of the love variety, and while Shampoo was interested to see the rooms and maybe convincing Ranma to take the next step in their marriage, Ranma was not.

They were still looking around for a reputable hotel when a human-sized shape passed over their heads over the rooftops. Ranma blinked, staring upward past the glare of the lamp posts. "Er, was it me, or did a man who looks like a shorter, way older version of Soun just race by?"

Shampoo was about to reply, but the next moment, a young woman followed after the little, shouting angrily, "Get back here! Dammit, you've peeped on me for the last time, you, you reprobate!"

"Huh... that gal, I think that was Mai," Ranma muttered. "The ninjutsu user I met at that tournament a few days before arriving in Nerima. I think I mentioned her to ya before, right? Let's go see what's going on."

That caused Shampoo's eyes to narrow, but she followed Ranma up onto the rooftops, where they quickly caught up to the woman as she tried to chase after the first form he had seen. As they did, Shampoo took in the other young woman's looks, and while a part of her had to nod at Mai's sense of style, internally, Shampoo's possessive side reared up and hissed.

The Japanese girl was taller than Shampoo, with long dark brown hair tied into a tight, waist length ponytail with bangs falling to either side of her light brown eyes. She wore a sleeveless outfit Shampoo had seen on kunoichi dress in manga, with two red and white tassels at the back ending with large balls of the same colors and ropes around her shoulders.

With that outfit on, it was obvious she was wearing, either a very small breastband or nothing underneath, as it showed off both a lot of cleavage and side boob. Both of which made it clear Mai had a larger chest than Shampoo by at least a size, although they looked even fuller than that.

"Yo, Mai, what's going on?" Ranma quipped, grinning.

At first, Mai's reaction was all he could hope for. Mai stumbled, nearly falling on her face, but she quickly recovered and lashed out with a punch that Ranma dodged blinking in surprise. "What the hell, where did you come from!?"

"Down below, we saw ya chasing after the oldster and wondered what was going on," Ranma answered, ducking under her punch and backing away.

Mai paused her attack, pulling back her hand from where she had been about to lash out with a fan, flicking it shut and staring at Ranma even as she turned back to try and spot the man she was hunting. "You, you look kind of familiar... right? I think I met you at that martial arts competition I entered out in Hokkaido. You analyzed one of my matches."

"That's me," Ranma said with a nod as she and Shampoo bracketed the woman.

"Huh, small world. But is there something I can do for you? Because right now, I have a pervert to pummel," Mai growled.

"What did he do? And do you want some help?" Ranma asked.

Shampoo added, "Shampoo think all perverts need occasional beating down. Keeps them from getting make heads.

"Hah, now there is a woman after my own heart! As for what Jubei did, he spied on me in the bath and then groped a few other girls and me as we were coming out of the public baths near here."

"Damn, let's spread out and catch the pervert then!" Ranma smirked. "Come at him from three different directions, cut him off from running away and beat him into the ground."

"Sounds like a plan. A quick warning, Jubei is tricky. He's not a master of Judo for nothing," Mai warned, then looked over at Shampoo. "Hi, I'm Mai Shiranui. Nice to meet you. So long as we beat the pervert into the ground anyway."

"Shampoo of Joketsuzoku," Shampoo answered, introducing herself before Ranma could.

Seeing Shampoo staring at Mai through narrowed eyes, Ranma frowned slightly but decided it was some weird women thing and quickly outlined a plan. The two girls agreed, and Ranma ducked down into an alleyway. Shampoo did the same, heading south around a taller building.

With the other two circling around their quarry, Mai raced after him away from the ocean, ignoring the cries of shock and surprise from those on the ground below.

Not having noticed her two new semi-allies, Jubei stopped and, alighting on a movie theater's roof, turned to face Mai. "Hohoho! Racing after me so passionately, Mai-chan? That's enough to give even an old dog like me some interesting thoughts!"

"Kunai Bunshin!" Mai shouted, concentrating her ki into her hands and launching daggers towards Jubei's feet. As the weapon left her hand, the ki she had shaped in her hand created several different images of the same weapon, which also streaked forward, obscuring where the real dagger was aiming.

Jubei chuckled, then yelled out, "KI-AI!!!" and thrust his fist forward, creating a wave of air pressure that struck the incoming daggers, pushing them off course.

He didn't see a kick from Ranma coming until the last second, but to Ranma's surprise, Jubei was able to block it with a palm. He couldn't catch Ranma's foot, though, the young martial artist pulling his leg back and launching a series of punches and kicks.

"And what is this? Some errant knight attempting to help you, Mai? Andy will be so sad to hear you're two-timing him like this!" Jubei taunted before a blow got through his defenses and hurled him sideways.

Blast, I've not been struck like that since I was the last time I fought Hanzo full on when we were younger, Jubei thought, pushing to his feet then yelping as Mai struck out, her fan lashing forward like a baton.

Dodging around that strike, Jubei tried to get a quick feel in, but Ranma pressed in too fast. "Oh darn it, come on, why are you ruining this old man's fun, youngster!?"

"All perverts need to get their heads caved in a time or two Old Timer. Don't take it personally, you're just my weekly quota," Ranma taunted.

The two of them kept Jubei's attention fully occupied, but to Ranma's astonishment, they couldn't finish him off. Blows sent both ways occasionally got through, but while Ranma could redirect Jubei's blows most of the time, they still stung. *Still, at least he really is just a judo fighter. I know that style so well I can tell where his blows are coming from as if they were written in neon lights even without being able to read his body language very well.*

In contrast, Mai grunted under the impact of punches that got through her defenses. She wasn't as able to dodge or redirect Jubei's blows, now that Jubei was taking this seriously, although her own skills were enough to keep him from getting a feel in or using her to get in Ranma's way, not an easy thing to do.

As for Ranma's strikes, they felt like sledgehammers even when he redirected them. Jubei tried to use some of his own ki moves, but Jubei had let his physical skills slide so much that he barely got in a few strikes on his own, pushed almost entirely on the defense.

So busy was he with the two attackers he didn't even see Shampoo waiting for him to get close to the edge of the roof. Once she saw his back towards her, Shampoo leaped up from below and swung her mace at the back of Jubei's head. The blow crashed in, sending him stumbling, and the next moment, Ranma's blow rocked his head to one side. Mai's next blow took him right in the fork, causing Jubei to squeal and fall to his knees, where Mai finished him off with a hammer kick. The old man slumped unconscious.

Mai breathed a sigh of relief as Jubei succumbed to his injuries and shook her head. "I know he's a friend of my father, and I shouldn't feel good about seeing him get such a beat down, but screw that! I've been dealing with his antics way too much since he took over my training a year ago."

"Huh, is that why you were at the tournament?" Mai nodded at Ranma's question and explained that her grandfather, Hanzo, had been away from home for much of that year, and whenever he was home, he would concentrate on training Andy, her fellow student. "I don't blame him for that. I've already pretty much mastered Shiranui-Ryu, but to then turn around and let that pervert be in charge of my training is just... Raaaahhhh!!!" she growled, stomping her foot and glaring down at Jubei. "I decided to come here to get away from him, and what does he do? Somehow, he follows me!"

"Er... you need a moment?" Ranma stepped back quickly, putting several yards of space between himself and Mai, while Shampoo just crossed her arms and nodded her head sagely.

Thankfully Mai simply stood there for a moment, breathing in and out before shaking her head. "I am good. I am calm. I have kicked him in the balls and it was good. Now I wish to move on," her voice was calm, but it was the calm of a volcano that had just erupted a bit and might have an even bigger eruption waiting under the surface.

"Right... but um, what do you want us to do with him? Just leave the old pervert here?"

"Good question," Mai muttered, but Shampoo already had a solution.

She grinned and pointed over her shoulder toward the distant ocean. "Catch and release always good, yes?"

Moments later, Ranma had used his Martial Arts Construction to build a large, water-tight casket. Once he was finished, they dropped Jubei's still-unconscious form into. Seconds later, the pervert was floating out into the ocean, and Ranma, Shampoo and Mai stood on a nearby rooftop watching him go. "So... you said you were here for something? And I hate to ask, but what was the name of your martial arts school again?"

"Oh, it's Shiranui-ninjutsu. As for why I'm here, I'm here to look at the Musubime Osoroshi style Hotojutsu school. What about you two?" Mai asked politely.

Shampoo blinked, then looked eager, leaning into Mai's personal space, clapping her hands together eagerly. "Wait, did you say ninjutsu!? Nin-nin stuff!? Shampoo see you using Bunshin, copy your throwing daggers. Are you kunoichi?"

"Hahaha, um well, I like to style myself a kunoichi, but my style isn't that of the full kunoichi," Mai snickered a bit, shaking her head and looking a bit embarrassed. "That, and there really isn't much connection between the modern view of shinobi and what they really were. So, we call ourselves more just 'mystical martial arts' really."

Shampoo pouted, then shrugged. "All dreams of kunoichi dashed but suppose it better to make your own. Make it real to you rather than to others." *And judging by your outfit, you certainly use the whole seduction thing anyway, regardless of what you call yourself,* Shampoo thought, backing away, feeling a mixture of jealousy and intrigue. *I wonder what I would look like in that kind of outfit?*

At that point, Ranma's stomach rumbled so loud that it almost sounded like a lion, and both Mai and Shampoo backed away quickly, staring at Ranma. Then Shampoo began to laugh, and Ranma hung his head. "Erm, can we go get some food now? We can keep talking, but er, the master must be fed."

Mai joined in with Shampoo's laughter even as she pointed over her shoulder. "Come on, I know a good noodle place."

"So, what's your story?" Mai asked moments later as she took a spoon of the noodles. The trio had grabbed some takeout and retreated to a rooftop where they could look out over the beach. "Are you here for something or passing through? Ooh, and are you two traveling together?" she asked, wiggling her eyebrows at Shampoo.

To Mai's surprise, the foreign girl didn't blush. Shampoo simply clamped onto Ranma's side, nodding happily. "Shampoo and Ranma on a romantic journey of adventure!" *And thank you for giving me that opening! I really hope you're not interested in Ranma, Mai, and if so, you'll back off now.*

Ranma made to open his mouth, then closed it and shrugged. "You know what, that's not actually a bad way of describing it. Shampoo and I met in China, and then again when she came... here for some reason or other, and I had basically decided I was done with following my Old Man's plans for my life."

"There are at least two, possibly even three different stories hidden in that very brief explanation," Mai muttered, shaking her head.

And I'm trying hard not to be jealous, she added internally. While Ranma hadn't put his arm around Shampoo or anything, Mai noticed he didn't pull or push her away either and simply put that lack of response down to the fact that public displays of affection were seen as

gauche in Japanese culture. *On the one hand, I'm glad to see another girl who isn't going to let that stop her from flirting, but on the other hand, damn it, Andy! Would it kill you to return some affection!?*

Instead of dwelling on the romantic reasons she would be jealous of the twosome, Mai concentrated on the training journey side of things. "But traveling all over would be amazing, especially out of Japan. I would love to see Hong Kong, China, Taiwan, maybe the Peloponnesians," Mai sighed longingly.

Shampoo raised an arm in the air and shouted "Hawaii!" and Mai nodded firmly, exchanging a handshake and laughing with the Chinese girl.

Confused, Ranma cocked his head to one side. "What kind of martial arts would you learn in Hawaii?" *And is it just me, or is Mai, like way nicer and less flirty now? This version's better.*

"That not be point of going there, trust Shampoo," Shampoo chuckled. "One sentence: Bikinis and luaus."

Ranma blinked, staring at his companion and nodded slowly. "Um... okay, yeah, I can see the appeal now."

"Hahaha!" Mai laughed as Shampoo made the victory sign with her hands.

OOOOOOO

Elsewhere, Kuno the elder sneezed as he hurled his explosive pineapple. The large fruit missed his target and hit the wall behind it, blasting it into pieces, much to the irate shouts of his current master. "Again! You're not leaving this island until you can hit eighteen targets one after another and then cut ten poles fit for the luau later!"

"Yes, Master!" *It must be my little Tatewaki or Ko-chan thinking of daddy. Well, don't worry, my sweet Keiki, I will be coming home soon!*

OOOOOOO

"So, you're here to look into the Musubime Osoroshi school too?" Mai asked after Ranma had told her the reason for their being on the island. Mai took a bite of her noodles and looked at the sky before looking back at the two wanderers, frowning. "I hate to tell you, Ranma, but I've been here for a few days, gathering information on them..."

Ranma made an interrogative noise around a bite of his food, and Mai shrugged, understanding what he was asking. "My own school isn't really in favor of going around and learning from others like you two are doing. But it makes an exception for things that might fit

our style. Hotojutsu seems to be a perfect fit, giving us a mid-range weapons style.” Mai scowled, waving her head out toward the ocean. “And I also needed to get away from Jubei... who then followed me here. Blast it.”

Shampoo reached over and patted Mai’s hand consolingly. “Perverts same whole world over.”

“Ugh, tell me about it.” Mai rolled her eyes before looking back at Ranma, shaking her head commiseratingly. “But anyway, Ranma, you won’t be allowed in. It’s an all-girl school. That’s why I was still here rather than trying to find it. I had to throw off Jubei before I could. I didn’t want to make a bad impression.”

“That’s understandable.” Ranma frowned, then shrugged, reaching for the water bottle he had bought with the noodles. it was cold enough. “But I think,” he said before pouring it over his head, “that I got it covered,” the redhead finished.

Mai’s eyes widened, and then they rolled back in her head as she slumped backward, fainting dead away.

Shampoo grabbed her, laughing even as she did, while Ranma grinned. “I’m actually beginning to enjoy that part. Not so much the reactions after they wake up.”

A small splash of the water from the bottle to her face was enough to wake Mai up, and she whirled around, staring at both of her companions, her chest flopping so much even Ranma could not help but look down at it for a brief second before controlling himself. Luckily, Shampoo had been looking too, so she didn’t notice his momentary loss of control.

“H, how, what the, what was that! How...Ranma? That has got to be the quickest clothing change and disguise I’ve ever seen!” Mai said, reaching across the table and poking Ranma in the chest, thinking that it was some kind of padding.

“But why the water, and how did you...” Mai trailed off as she felt a nipple underneath her finger and watched as the breast, she had thought was simple padding, gave slightly under her touch.

It didn’t give very much, not nearly as much as Mai’s own would have, but it was still very real, obviously as she could feel the nipple hardening just slightly under her touch before Ranma batted her hand away. “Hey, no touchy! Honestly, what is it with girls and poking my tits, huh? Is this some kind of female bonding thing I don’t know about?”

“Back home in village, Shampoo often felt up by other girls in the bath and did same to others too. Personal space between girls be very different than between boy-girl,” Shampoo answered with a shrug. “Have read mangas showing boys on sports teams using towel whips. Is same thing.”

“That is so not the same Shampoo!” Ranma shot back, shaking her head.

At that point, Mai had recovered enough to make somewhat understandable sentences. “How, what the! Is this some kind of transformation technique?” she muttered, grasping at straws. Even her master would’ve had trouble completely transforming his clothing, let alone putting on a bra, padding it, changing his hair color, and...

Suddenly Mai’s thoughts trailed to a halt as she stared at Ranma, slumping back. “W, where did your height go?” she muttered, staring at the redhead.

“Height no matter,” Shampoo giggled. “It a magical curse.”

Mai’s eyes narrowed. “Magic?” she repeated skeptically.

Ranma shrugged, pushed the water towards her, and reached into his pack, coming out with a small heating plate. “You want to try it?”

Moments later, Mai watched as Ranma transformed back into his male body, bulking upwards and a little outward in the shoulder area. She even went so far as to place her hand on his shoulder when Ranma transformed, getting a little of the water on her hand and feeling as if she’d just touched a rubber sheet with many things moving underneath it for some reason.

Seeing Mai’s look of freak-out growing, Shampoo nodded. “Shampoo agree. Seeing change one thing, feeling it happen another.”

“You both should try it from in here,” Ranma grumbled, looking up at Mai. “So, do you believe me now?”

Snorting, Mai moved back to her previous spot, her rear thumping down into it so hard her skirt wafted up slightly, her eyes wide and unseeing. “Okay, I’ve seen a lot of weird stuff. And... I mean... there is a certain mystical component to some of my school's techniques. But honest to goodness magic and curses? That’s beyond anything I ever thought could possibly be real. Still, I can’t deny what I saw or felt just then...” Mai shivered before going on resolutely. “Where in the hell did this curse come from? So, I can stay well away from it.”

“That a logical response,” Shampoo nodded and then explained about Jusenkyo, mentioning that her own people were situated nearby. “We use curse as punishment. If one to be punished goes, comes back good curse or not cursed, she let free. If not, she cursed.”

“That sounds really waaay too much about punishment rather than justice to my mind, but I’ll let that slide.” Mai then began to laugh quietly. “But yeah, Ranma, I suppose you ‘have it covered’.” She snickered then, rubbing Ranma’s hair. “Ooh, you’re so cuutteee shorty...” she teased, until Ranma smacked her head away, pouting.

It was true though. Ranma was barely five feet, at least two inches smaller than Shampoo, who was smaller than Mai, who stood five feet five inches.

Snorting at Ranma's glare up at her, Mai stood up. "Anyway, we should get moving. It's already evening, and we don't want to try to approach Musubime Osoroshi once it's night out." *Before I get distracted by how this makes your whole relationship even more romantic, drat it.*

United in purpose as well as curiosity about one another, Mai led the two wanderers over the rooftops, heading out of town. She had gotten directions to where this Musubime Osoroshi Hotojutsu school was situated in Sado-Yahiko-Yoneyama Quasi-National Park.

This took them out deeper into the woods, passing into the rest of the island proper, which was, for the most part, a national park and heritage site. The trees here were tall, the foliage underneath deep, and all in all, it looked like a very nice park. And better, all three of them could move through the forest just as easily as they had been moving over the rooftops previously, talking about their training up to this point, rivals, and fights they had been in. Typical martial artist 'getting to know you' fare, really.

But as they came closer to where Mai's information said the Hotojutsu were supposed to be, the Shiranui-Ryu heiress started to slow down. She looked around them and then down to the ground, following something the other two couldn't see, her eyes narrowing.

"What wrong?" Shampoo questioned while Ranma quickly ascended the tree, almost automatically taking the overwatch position over the two other girls.

"There are traps around here." With that, Mai jumped to the next tree, where she balanced on a thin branch, kneeling down and pushing aside a bit of the foliage. This revealed a thin string going down the tree toward the ground. It turned out to be connected to a large tree branch as thick across as Mai was, hung as if it was still connected to the tree, but set so it would swing down much like the boulder Ranma and Shampoo had used in the toughness training.

"There's more up here," Ranma reported, hopping down to join the two girls. "It looks like an early warning system."

Shampoo frowned, cocking her head. "Is this some kind of test?" she muttered in Chinese, not really expecting an answer from Ranma.

But to her surprise, she got one from Mai. "I'd wager so, yes. You have to get through them one way or another before you prove yourself worthy of being taught by Musubime Osoroshi. My own family does something similar, although ours are more obvious than this. And probably a bit more lethal closer in, hence why they are obvious."

“You speak Chinese!” Shampoo squealed, clapping her hands in delight and fighting the urge to glomp the other girl. “Oh my word, it’s been liked breaking logs with a needle to get Ranma interested enough to learn.”

Mai laughed. “Yeah, say what you will about Jubei, but he was very firm that I needed a good grounding in languages and history since he took over training me.”

Ranma had been following this and understood about one out of every four words and now sighed theatrically. “Great, now there’s another reason for me to learn Chinese. Thanks, Mai.”

“You’re welcome,” Mai chirped, moving off through the woods as Ranma groaned behind her, laughing at the redhead’s pain. In turn, Shampoo snickered, gave Ranma a kiss on the cheek, and then hurried after Mai.

Knowing that there were traps about, all three of them moved through the trees slower now, while Mai could move even more silently than Ranma did through the foliage. But the redhead proved that she was just as good at spotting traps as Mai quickly. Halting progress at one point, she gestured to a tree branch that both other girls had been about to jump to and made the wait sign with one hand.

As they paused, Ranma leaped higher up into the same tree he had gestured to, landing with her feet on two smaller branches. Then, to Mai’s astonishment, Ranma almost seemed to sit down, one leg curling over the branch as she let go with the other before flipping downward, holding herself steady with only that one leg supporting her weight as she reached downward.

“That branch is nowhere near thick enough to hold her weight. Ranma, is there something you want to tell me? Some other magical ability you have to negate gravity?” Mai drawled.

“Redistribution and cancellation of weight is a staple of Anything Goes, Aerial Style,” Ranma answered, wiggling one hand. This brought Mai’s attention to the fact that Ranma’s hand was gently touching the tree’s trunk, while the other one was reaching down towards the erstwhile branch that had caught Ranma’s attention.

That light touch seemed enough to redirect some of Ranma’s weight, and Mai whistled quietly. “I might want to learn that.”

“Shampoo knows! Sparring with Ranma fun, but Aerial Style very hard to get used to,” Shampoo pouted.

They watched as Ranma reached into several smaller branches sticking out around the one Mai and Shampoo had been about to jump to, pulling out several very thin metal wires, which would’ve tangled their feet up something fierce.

Or worse if they have barbs on them. This trap could easily be made fatal, Mai realized.

“You’re always vulnerable right as you land.” Ranma shook her head. “Someone knows about tree-walking for certain.”

“So, do we stay up here, or do we switch to the ground?” Mai asked. “It’s a case of harder to spot traps versus more traps to deal with.”

Ranma suggested they stay in the trees, and after deliberating, the other two agreed, and the three of them kept moving. Although they were now slower than before. Eventually, the traps got so thick and so well hidden that it was almost inevitable that one of them would trip a trap.

That worthy turned out to be Ranma, who, upon landing on a branch that she had previously made certain was free of traps, moved off, brushing aside a branch above her head as she moved forward. That branch was attached to a secondary trap, which swung a small stone into Ranma’s face, even as she jumped forward.

It didn’t really hurt, but it startled Ranma enough to mess up her jump to the next tree, and she landed on a branch that she hadn’t been aiming for. The next instant, long wires wrapped around her feet, and Ranma overbalanced backward, yelping, “Redhead down!”

A spring trap on the ground greeted Ranma, but Ranma was already flipping herself upwards and landed hands first, pushing off the trap even as it activated. Two logs came out of the forest to either side and would have crashed into Ranma if she had been in the same position as a moment ago.

Landing nearby, Ranma grinned cheerfully, reaching down and tearing her way out of the wire, her grin segueing into a whistle of surprise at the amount of strength that took. “This stuff is tough.”

Unfortunately, Shampoo and Mai were both a little distracted watching Ranma’s accident and each of them activated a trap. Shampoo found one of her arms tied to her side, although she raised her other arm before the spring-launched bola had been able to completely encircle her.

Mai wasn’t so lucky, and while able to dodge being caught, another bola’s iron ball cracked into the side of her head and sent her falling down onto the ground. However, despite her cursing, Mai was no stranger to pain, and her fan lashed out and down into the ground around her as she shouted out a technique from her school. “Burst Blast!”

Much like the technique Jinbei used in the brief fight against him, Mai’s fan flung out a blast of wind, which caused several of the traps below to activate before she landed. With the

way clear, Mai flipped herself, landing on all fours in among them, staring around her like an angry cat in the middle of hurled daggers, tiny darts and another bola.

Nearby, Ranma had made the mistake of looking towards Mai as she did this, about to congratulate the taller girl on a great wind technique, since Ranma wasn't certain if she would've been able to do that with so little prep time. However, the redhead's words caught in her throat as she watched Mai's breasts sway from side to side and saw a decent amount of side-boob from this angle.

Instead, Ranma whipped her head around to one side, shouting up at Shampoo. "Watch out, I'd wager that now that we've sprung so many of their traps, were going to be ambushed soon..."

As Ranma spoke, shouts from all around them echoed, and long meteor hammers flew from the hands of several women who burst out of the foliage all around them, attacking as they came.

"Yeah, see, just like that. That's how my luck goes," Ranma muttered, racing forward to close the range.

Shampoo snarled, then launched herself towards the women, not even bothering to try and break out of the bola around her waist that was clamping one arm to her side. Shampoo knew she was strong, but with no leverage, she'd have to use her other hand to unwind the bola, which wasn't going to happen. *First, beat these bitches down, then release myself.*

"You have entered the Ropeway, the great test of our school! You have failed the first test, and now you must fight your way out wish to prove worthy," shouted one of the women. Her clothing, the same dark green and mottled brown pants and shirts as the other women around her, was denoted by a red collar, indicating higher rank within the school.

Beyond wearing the same outfits, they all used rope or chain-based weapons. Kusarigama were very much in evidence, along with rope darts, weighted ropes, bolas, meteor hammers, and chain whips but made of lengths of rope with connecting metal bits. The one marked by the red collar used a manriki, although its length was rope instead of a chain.

Mai brought up her fans as if they were two daggers, jabbing aside one of the incoming scythes easily, then launched herself forward, her fan opening to block another strike from a meteor hammer. Her fan darted forward, then Mai moved her arm in a small loop, tying the rope around her arm before Mai pulled. A punch to the head sent that attacker to the forest floor, groaning, while Mai spoke, her tone practically normal. "This reminds me of some of the tests my grandfather put me through. Only most of it would be mechanical, rather than actual people."

Ranma nodded, ducking under a series of blows from one of the women, who was using a shorter-ranged rope dart. She was using it expertly, flicking it in and out quickly, but not fast enough against someone of Ranma's caliber. She dodged it by a hair, and her hand flashed up, grabbing the rope and pulling her in. The woman moved with this trying to loop the weapon around Ranma's head and shoulder, while lashing out with a punch, but Ranma blocked it and returned a punch that caused the other girl to double over. The next instant, her own weapon was bound around her arms and waist, and Ranma let her there, moving on quickly.

"Yeah, this definitely reminds me of one or two of my Pop's training techniques," the redhead drawled even as two more attacked her with meteor hammers.

But these were not nearly as well-trained as the one who had closed with the pigtailed girl, and Ranma's hands darted forward. Even as the two girls tried to redirect the weighted ends of their meteor hammer away, Ranma caught their ropes beyond the weight and tugged both women off balance. With that done and seeing their meteor hammers were wound around their forearms, Ranma whirled, tossing them through the air.

Both women crashed to the ground accompanied by grunts of pain. But at the same time, Ranma grunted as an impact to the back of her head sent Ranma forward.

Another woman lashed out at his legs with a chain whip. but Ranma leaped up over that attack and closed, kicking out and catching her opponent in the chin, sending her flying. "Huh, these gals need to work on their footwork and quick thinking."

"Tell me about it," the one marked by a red collar grumbled even as she charged in before halting, using her manriki to good effect, whirling one end to block a jab from Ranma then the other to smash into the shorter girl's chest. "But not all of us are novices!"

"So I see," Ranma grunted at the impact but moved through it, trying to close, reflecting this whole fight was proving she needed to add some weapons skills to his repertoire. *Screw Pops' ideas of what's weak and whatever. Weapons can help, even if they ain't as adaptable as fists and feet.*

To his surprise, the journeywoman flicked her manriki again, whirling it around, blocking the redhead's blows and redirecting them to the side. She then tried to go for Ranma's feet but could still recover and block the kick this earned her as Ranma leaped over her strike. The other woman, a college-age girl with bleached blonde hair and a tan – basically a ganguro gal – used a portion of the rope length to block Ranma's blow, the rope acting almost like a length of wood. "Huh... ki manipulation."

The journeywoman snickered and twirled away, the weighted metal end of her manriki suddenly popping out several spikes appearing there as she flicked it at Ranma's face. "That's not all we can do!"

Nearby, Shampoo had already pulled out one of her maces and was now smacking aside any of the long-range attacks that came near her, having landed near four meteor hammer users. Growling, Shampoo charged forward like an angry bull. The proud Amazon had not liked being caught in the trap earlier and wanted to **discuss** matters with these women up close and personal.

However, the women didn't let this happen. Seeing her weapon, one of them shouted some kind of code. "Ascending Rose!"

The women who had been the target of Shampoo's desire to inflict violence spread out in every direction up into the trees. From there, they began to attack from long-range once more from various angles. As they did, another one of their fellow students came out of the wood, hurling a weighted net towards Shampoo, catching her even as she tried to leap after them. "Aiyaa!"

Seeing this, Ranma moved to her assistance, breaking off fighting the journeywoman, who had been pressing him decently hard but wasn't able to keep up with Ranma's sudden jump to the side. Bouncing off a branch above them, Ranma landed near Shampoo, tearing the net off her, but even as she did so, the ground underneath her gave way into a pit trap.

"Oh, you have to beeEEE!!" she screamed just as it caved in under her weight. Yet despite her surprise, Ranma was still able to roll forward as the ground gave way. Grabbing the pit's edge, she hung there for a second, glancing down and seeing a pit of spikes before flipping herself upwards. But that opened Ranma up to two more flung nets, which tangled the redhead something fierce.

But Mai was still free, and she danced backward and away from several rope darts coming her way even as many of the women around them turned her attention to the tall girl. As she twirled back to face the attackers, they all balked, seeing her holding a small bomb in her hand. "Wh... where did..."

Mai winked at the girl who spoke before lobbing the bomb forward. This was followed by more as she twirled, so fast even Ranma couldn't figure out where the bombs were coming from. *I know that was an example of weapons space, but where the hell is Mai hiding a pocket on that outfit?* The redhead thought in shock, pausing her attempts to tear the nets off her.

Tiny explosions of smoke and fire went off as the bombs hit. There wasn't enough gunpowder in them to really hurt anyone unless they got hit right in the face, which Mai was careful to not let happen. But it was enough to disorient those nearby and fill the area with smoke.

In that smoke, Mai closed, finishing off three of their attackers in quick succession, although one of them was able to get a good blow in, which doubled her over for a second. But

Mai just used this to grab at the woman's upcoming leg, twisting and hurling her into a fourth Hotojutsu user.

By the time the smoke began to fade, Ranma finally got herself free. Meanwhile, Shampoo had lost her mace, and her one arm was still captured, but several of the other attackers lay unconscious nearby, hurled in every direction by furious blows from the annoyed Amazon.

Seeing the rest of the Hotojutsu users down, Ranma raced forward, intent on finishing her duel with the journeywoman. "Come on, Ganguro gal, let's finish this!"

"What did you call me midget!?" the other woman shrieked angrily. "My hair might not be natural, but my skin color is, you little...!"

The woman flicked out her manriki once more, but not at Ranma. Instead, she aimed at the net Ranma had just pulled off, intent on catching the redhead's legs. But Ranma leaped up over it, then world around several more blows from the weapon, noting in shock that the rope length of the manriki had extended in the woman's hands. *Holy hell, another ki application, oh yes, coming here was a great move!*

One time, the woman was too slow to pull her weapon back, and Ranma landed balancing on top of the woman's weapon, causing her eyes to widen right before a kick caught her in the face, hurling her backward. And unfortunately for the tanned girl, like the others, she just didn't have the strength to take a blow from Ranma. She was hurled off her feet, unconscious, although Ranma had been careful not to actually break her nose or anything else.

For a moment there was silence as Ranma and the others looked around, then Mai breathed out, straightening up from a combat crouch and adjusting her outfit slightly. "That was interesting. I don't know if I'd have been able to win through on my own."

Ranma thrust out her chest, about to boast that she would have, but Shampoo's club caught her in the shoulder. The Amazon had taken the time to pick it up – her chui were gifts of her late mother - before stowing them in her weapons space again, then reaching down to the bola around her waist and tearing it into pieces. "Ranma no lie. Number of traps, surprise on enemy side, and that journeyman able to step back, give orders? Ranma would lose too."

"Well, I suppose... but ya didn't have ta blurt it out Shampoo," Ranma muttered.

"Shampoo do. Ranma sometimes have too too big ego, even for martial artist."

"Ooh, that's harsh, especially coming from you, little Miss Village Champion," Ranma taunted.

Shampoo grinned, but Mai interrupted their banter. "An ego can be a good thing, so long as you don't take it into extremes. I think that's what Shampoo saying."

Ranma pouted at them both ganging up on her, but before she could say anything, a new voice interrupted them. An old but amused female voice, its owner unseen in the forest around them.

"That is indeed the case. Although more important to the matter at hand, you were attacked so violently because of how deep into our area of the forest you were able to come before tripping some of our traps. I am afraid Misaki and the guards reacted more violently than they should have."

Ranma scowled, crossing her arms and looking around, trying to figure out where the voice was coming from. But the echoes of the woods and groans of their former opponents were making it impossible to pinpoint. "Well, that's nice to hear, I guess. And I suppose those first traps we bypassed wouldn't have been lethal. But er... Mystery Voice, what happens now? Is this where we challenge you for the right to learn some of your school's techniques?"

"No, I don't take challenges like that, child. They are a pointless waste of time. As for what does happen, you have already passed a test of skill, although not in the normal manner. But that just means we need to get creative."

Shampoo was about to open her mouth and say that this answer worried her, when she found rope again going around her waist, accompanied by one going around her neck, mouth, and forehead. These ropes were pulled taut, even as Shampoo tried to break free, and the Chinese girl found herself tied up and on the ground before she could jump free, let alone shout out for help. "Aiyaa! Why is it always Shampoo!?"

Ranma was already turning in that direction charged forwards, but the redhead was attacked before she could move to Shampoo's aid. Ropes lashed down out of the foliage above, a rope going around her neck.

Ranma grabbed the rope, although not fast enough to stop it from looping around her neck. With that hold, Ranma flipped herself upward, twirling in place, pulling the rope around her legs, hoping to pull it out of the user's hands. This didn't work, but Ranma bent at the waist, and that worked, tearing the rope free. But before she could do anything more, several more ropes caught her, and soon, Ranma was tied up as well.

Mai got lucky. She was standing on top of a downed tree, with more area around her free of things to block her line of sight, and she did so for a few moments. Yet from her position, Ranma saw the real attack coming up from below. *Okay, that's bizarre. I knew this school had some ki techniques but that much control?!*

As she watched, thin ropes moved along the ground like extremely long snakes before bunching up under some unseen order to catch Mai around the legs. The ropes then continued to climb up her body, even as she tried to jump away. Despite her struggles and an attempt to cut at the ropes with a dagger, Mai was soon tied up in the traditional Hotojutsu capture style. The ropes continued to move under some unseen user's command until she was completely tied up.

Then, somehow, the ropes broke off, cutting themselves off, around her legs. The bits of rope around Mai stopped moving, while the rest retreated, soon disappearing into the grass and undergrowth.

With all three 'invaders' now tied up like prisoners ready to be transported to the shogun for sentencing, an old woman hopped out of the tree beyond where Shampoo had been attacked. She was taller than even Mai but stooped a little bit with age. Her arms and legs were completely wound around with ropes and thin chains. Ranma couldn't tell where either chain and rope began, seemingly one leading into another, but the connections were also hidden to his eyes.

The edge of these chain-ropes was moving even as the old woman stepped forward. Both arms were making little circling motions to gather her weapon in from the ground below. Around her waist was another manriki, its weights dangling like a belt buckle around her waist. There were even a few chains in her long solid-gray hair, which Ranma suspected could be used as a weapon too.

"I thought you said that we had won our challenge. And that we weren't going to have to fight you," Ranma grumbled to the woman, who could only be the master of the school they were all here to investigate.

"What my companion means to ask is, might we know the name of the learned one who has trussed us up so well?" Mai cut in. "Forgive her. Ranma has a mouth much larger than her size would indicate."

"Well, at least one of you has some manners. My name is Atama Nawa, Master of Musubime Osoroshi Hotojutsu," the woman said, smirking slightly, "and I said you had shown your combat prowess. Unfortunately, part of this exercise was also supposed to show us how you fair in the first level of our teaching rather than the second and third."

"I'm sorry, but what does that mean exactly?" Mai inquired. Her tone was still polite, but she was also trying to twist her body to work a hand free. But she was having no luck at all.

As she did, both Ranma and Shampoo made a point of looking away. The way she was tied up looked sexy on Shampoo, who wore her normal tai chi chuan outfit, which wasn't designed to be very sexy. On Mai, who was wearing a far sexier outfit if nothing else, it was enough to cause death by blood loss in any male, no matter how self-controlled. Somehow her

outfit was still pressed against her body rather than off one side or the other, which would have let her breasts out. Her legs were tied together, crisscrossed with rope up her body. Her arms were tied behind Mai like Ranma, only even higher, while her chest and privates were caught in the center of a series of triangles.

Atama smiled at them faintly. "Our school has four levels of training that a person can learn. The first is evasion and escape. You two proved to be excellent at evasion and detection and then extremely skilled in combat, which is spread across my school's second and third levels of training. Now, I need to see where you fit in with the rest of my students in terms of escape, the last portion of the first level of education."

Ranma nodded at that as it made some sense. *Although this can't be the first time outsiders have come by to investigate their school, Nawa's acting like this is normal.*

With that, Ranma looked down at herself, blushing just a bit at what the ropes were doing to her clothing and body presently. Two of the places where the crisscrossed ropes wound around her body were especially annoying, rubbing at her nipples. A third was right over her navel and almost tickled her, but thankfully not quite. And even better, Ranma's legs were just looped around by the ropes instead of the rope being tied in various knots.

The perusal of her own predicament done, Ranma looked over at Shampoo, which proved to be a mistake. If Ranma's rope prison was a slightly erotic sight, seeing Shampoo tied up like this was worse.

Shampoo was gagged, a thick knot over her mouth, causing her to be unable to speak. Her breasts were caught in ropes above and below, squeezing and pushing them forward in a way that reminded Ranma of a doujin Hiroshi had forced into Ranma's face. Shampoo's arms were tied to her side by those same ropes, her hands flailing free near her crotch, and her legs were tied in such a way that she was kneeling, facing towards Ranma.

"The objective here is to discover if you can escape the Hotojutsu capture technique. If you can escape using a weapon upon your person, that is all right. It just will show there is room for improvement in your basic flexibility. I also noted, respectful one, that you and the purple-haired girl both used weapon space, an extremely advanced ki technique," Atama noted, addressing Mai and Shampoo. "Undoubtedly, that can be used for this as well."

Ranma looked down at her own body, thinking about it, then decided to try, flipping herself up onto her feet, somehow balancing there on her toes despite how taught the ropes were around her legs. Pressing her shoulders back, Ranma brought her head down, where she began to bite through the rope around her chest.

"A little unorthodox and quite inelegant, but acceptable for now, I suppose," Atama muttered. Her verdict given, she turned her attention to where the tallest intruder was still struggling.

Mai also tried to move her arms and neck but couldn't. Realizing this quickly, she turned to other means and began concentrating, feeling out her weapons space.

As the now nearly free Ranma looked on, something in Mai's chest burst, burning away both a bit of her outfit and some of the rope, allowing her to wrench her upper body free.

"Hmm, now what was that?" Atama questioned, moving closer to Mai while around her, Atama's students started to recover, groaning and holding their injuries.

Mai blushed a bit, mumbling something under her breath.

"I'm sorry, dear, but while my body may still be spry, my hearing's not what it used to be," Atama drawled.

"It's my boob window, all right! It's a weapons space situated in my cleavage!" Mai shouted, hopping in place in embarrassment. "My Judo teacher made me practice it this past year until I could form a weapons space within my darn cleavage. It's useful, but you seriously don't want to know how he 'taught' me how to use it."

"Heh, well, don't worry, child. All you had to do was escape. I'm not going to take points away for how you did it. Although I can certainly understand if you're here to get away from a perverted master."

Atama flicked her arms forward outward, and Mai flinched, thinking she was about to be tied up again. But instead, the ropes around Atama's arms coiled around bits of the rope Mai was still caught in, and suddenly, the ropes around Mai fell away.

Being the only one still incapacitated, Shampoo grumbled, but hearing Atama's words, she twisted her hands and body until her hands were hidden between her thighs and stomach. Undulating a bit, Shampoo grunted and groaned against the knot in her mouth, but somehow a moment later, there was a glint of metal, and she was holding a tiny punch dagger in her hand.

Ranma blinked, staring. "Er, where were you hiding that?" she asked, never having seen that dagger, not even when they were in the cave in China.

Using the extremely tiny, very thin palm dagger, Shampoo sliced the ropes around her thighs then her feet. With that done, she showed an insane level of control, dropping the dagger to her foot, where she caught it in her toes. As the others watched, she somehow bent her leg upwards, slicing both her shirt and the first two ropes tied under her chest, freeing her forearms to move. Soon Shampoo was free, pulling the knot from her mouth and finally able to answer Ranma's question, although the answer wasn't very informative. "You not want to know, Ranma."

“Well, that was an excellent example of improvisation, my dear. Well done!” Atama clapped. “However, allow me to show you one trick for free that, should you wish to learn from my school, you could learn with enough dedication.”

She turned to the journeyman who had led the defense against the three ‘invaders.’ “Misaki, front and center.”

“Yes, Master.” With a final glare Ranma’s way – evidently Misaki didn’t like being called a ganguro despite dying her hair blonde, which was weird in Ranma’s mind - the younger woman moved to stand in front of her master. She stood still, even as the ropes coiled around Atama’s arms moved under her ki-commands, flashing forward and somehow splitting into multiple ropes as they wrapped around Misaki’s body.

Oh wow, is that some kind of replication via ki? That makes even my school’s Bunshin seem a shadowy, hehehe, imitation, Mai thought, her eyes wide at the implications.

Soon, as the three newcomers watched in various shades of red, the woman was completely tied up, much the same way that the trio had been, standing up as Mai was, but otherwise the same. Yet as they watched, the woman closed her eyes. A second later, portions of her body began to glow, the glow encompassing different bits of the rope coiled around her.

A second later, some of those knots had loosened. Misaki then showed flexibility almost equal to Shampoo’s, working one arm free, then the other until finally standing divested of her former rope prison.

“I’d be interested just in the ki manipulation this school has, never mind the weapons skills,” Ranma muttered. “I’m not certain how applicable that particular trick would be in fight, but being able to connect to your ki so easily could be a major help.”

“Shampoo think Ranma right, though she think style is a little perverted, despite Old Woman’s comments on elegance. But willing to go along with things,” Shampoo whispered.

Mai nodded firmly. “I’m not so interested in that ki technique. I get some of that for my own style. But evasion, embedding ki in weapons and then manipulating those weapons the various ways Master Nawa showed, ooh wee!”

Now having shown the trio of newcomers another aspect of her school, Atama was satisfied they had taken the hook. Now she turned away, inwardly chortling. *Yes, these three can bring more real-life combat training to my school, which it severely lacks at the moment. And there could be some techniques worthy of being added to our repertoire as well here. That weapons space technique two of them used, for example. Needing to share some of our own is a small price to pay in comparison.*

Master Nawa whistled, and moments later, several middle-aged appeared, moving to help the wounded. None of the youngsters were badly injured, but a few would be sore for days from the pummeling the trio of erstwhile intruders had given them.

To Ranma, the newcomers looked more like schoolmarms than martial artists, only fitter than most of that breed. The clucking and muttering about their charges certainly added to that impression. *Huh. Is this a martial arts school or a girls' boarding school?*

Ten minutes' walk at the slow pace of the wounded brought them to the edge of the forest and out into a large, cleared area where the school began. And once more, Ranma wondered if Musubime Osoroshi was a boarding school or a martial arts school.

In the center of the cleared area was a single large building, which looked like someone had transported Furinkan High's main building here, minus the clock face. That absence made Ranma breathe a sigh of relief. *That would be weird even by my standards, but hey, it could happen. But I soooo do not want to see Kuno around here.*

A little lower, wider and longer building set to one side, amidst several outdoor areas for different training exercises. A series of smaller cabins scattered around the area's outer edge added a camp-like atmosphere to everything.

While the worst battered among the students were taken towards one such building, Atama turned to the others. "Show our guests to the commissary girls. When they've been fed and watered, I'll send Karin to bring them to my office. Misaki, with me."

The younger girls all bowed something that Mai and Ranma followed quickly. Ranma wouldn't normally, but Nawa had already shown enough for Ranma to take her seriously as a Master. Shampoo didn't. In her society, bowing was for the clan's elders or doctors. Being a martial arts master was not enough to win automatic deference. But Ranma elbowed her in the side, and Shampoo sighed and followed suit.

As the older women left, the three newcomers suddenly were crowded by the remaining young women they had fought less than an hour ago. "You three were so good!" one of the girls who fought them said, leading them in the proper direction. "No wonder the mistress needs time to figure out where to put you. I don't think anyone's ever been able to fight their way through the ambush point. And then you were all able to get free too, which is even more unusual."

Ranma shrugged, trying to downplay things. "We did bring some pretty interesting skills to the party."

"Bah, we rocked, and you know it, Shortie," Mai bragged while Shampoo grinned and nodded, enjoying the attention.

It reminded her of being back home with her clan. *I wouldn't say I miss home, but I do miss some of the girls my own age. Silly, really, especially given Ranma being here but... oh... A frown suddenly appeared on her face. Oh dear... unless this place is like those weird schools in the shoujo-ai mangas I read once, this could put a serious crimp on my love life. Damn.*

Unaware of Shampoo's suddenly annoyed thoughts, the girls led the trio into the commissary. There, other girls were doling out a simple dinner of rice and fish. But there was a lot of it, which warmed a portion of Ranma's soul quite nicely.

As they sat down, Mai was still looking around with a smile. When there was a break in the conversation, she observed, "This place looks really nice. I had honestly feared this whole school was a pervert's idea of a good time. And while the whole being tied up thing worried me, I'm pleased to see that isn't the case."

"Oh no, Master Nawa is death on that kind of thing. A few days ago, she and Apprentice Yukari ran off some old pervert who had been trying to get through the traps. He evaded the ready guards entirely and was almost to the school's hot springs before he finally ran out of luck. Can you believe that?" another girl nearby said, shaking her head.

"You don't say," Mai murmured, sweatdropping. *That sounds like my attempt to lead Jubei off after coming out here this afternoon failed miserably, darn it. Thank God I wasn't with him at the time.*

"Huh, that sounds bad. But tell me, what else does Master Nawa teach here?" Ranma asked, looking around at their fellow diners.

"Everything!" chorused many of them, laughing.

"You'll see soon," one girl added. "I just hope you had good grades in school, or else you'll run into trouble here."

"Huh?" Ranma and Shampoo chorused, while Mai looked curious.

"This school isn't just a training school. It's a kind of elite high school too," one of the other girls answered. "It's actually one of the better ones on Sado Island despite its small size."

Ranma groaned loudly at that, while Shampoo and Mai looked intrigued. Soon, dinner was done, and Master Nawa sent one of the other teachers to lead the trio to her office.

As they sat down across from Nawa in a room that looked more like a principal's office than anything else, she asked them what they hoped to accomplish. "I don't get the impression any of you are looking to join my school here full-time, which is a pity."

“We’re not here for that, sorry. We’re here to learn as much as we can and incorporate it into our own styles. Shampoo here practices Joketsuzoku Wushu, and I practice Anything Goes, which both emphasize learning from other styles,” Ranma explained. *Although I’m being way more open about it than my old man ever was.* “Mai here is the heiress to her style, so she just wants to...”

“To learn as much as I can. Specifically, the traditional Hotojutsu skills of capture and some of your ki techniques. I’d be willing to pay...” Mai spoke up for herself, only to fall silent as the glare on Master Nawa’s face registered.

Luckily it wasn’t directed at her, rather at Ranma, who blinked in surprise and growing concern. “I know of Anything Goes. It’s an ancient martial arts style, led by a man named Happosai. Do you know him?”

“Never heard of him,” Ranma replied honestly. “Why, he owe ya money or something? Or did he steal something? If he promised someone from his school would marry someone from yours, you’re outta luck.”

Mai stared at Ranma in surprise at this list of possible wrongs, but Atama relaxed. It didn’t look like Ranma was lying. *And with a body like that, there’s no way Happosai wouldn’t have taken advantage of her being part of his school. Good grief, I’ve heard of the term short stack before, but never has it appeared so accurate before.*

“Or something. Let’s just say Happosai is to women’s underthings as Mai’s former master was apparently to her,” Atama drawled, watching Ranma breathe a sigh of relief. “Still, I can tell that you are telling the truth, even if that litany tells me that you have been in contact with someone from his school that has continued the dishonorable acts he began.”

She held Ranma’s gaze for a time, and Ranma just nodded. “Yeah, my Pops always went on and on about honor, but sometimes, he didn’t act that way. Still, I try to hold myself to a higher standard.”

“Mmm... well, we will see. And with that unpleasantness out of the way, let us turn back to the subject at hand. You’re not the first group of students we’ve dealt with who has come here with training in other styles. I am perfectly willing to pass on a certain amount of training to you, so long as doing so does not disrupt my school. And for the record, I accept no dojo challenges or anything of that nature. Understood?”

Atama waited until all three nodded with varying degrees of understanding before going on. “And I will keep the secrets of my school to myself and those who are actually a part of it. That is nonnegotiable.”

“Wait, that whole ki controlling rope thing you showed us before, and your ki loosening technique that ganguro used to get out of rope bondage wasn’t a secret?” Ranma asked in surprise.

“I would recommend not calling Misaki that to her face outside of a sparring match. Inside it... go nuts. She needs to learn to control her temper,” Atama advised dryly. “As for those two techniques? One you will not be able to reproduce without direct instruction. The other is merely a refinement of basic ki control.”

“Basic ki control, she say,” Shampoo grumbled. “Shampoo getting impression Ranma and Shampoo be flailing in dark before this on that topic.”

“Quite possibly if you are trying to teach yourself how to use ki beyond your weapons space techniques. We’ll return to that topic in a moment. But as I mentioned before, our school has four levels of instruction. The first is evasion, trap work and escape. I know all three of you need to work on your escape abilities, but what about trap work?”

The three of them looked at one another, and Mai held up a hand, indicating she would probably be interested. Shampoo followed while Ranma shook her head. Traps weren’t direct enough for his/her preferences. On the other hand, Mai and Shampoo could see the utility of them in various ways.

Atama marked that down, looking up at them after doing so. “Hmm, as a side note, and this is something you might have heard already, but I need to go over it officially. So long as you are here, you will also be taking regular high school lessons.”

While Mai and Shampoo nodded, Ranma scowled and looked away, her arms crossed under her chest. Seeing that, Atama chuckled dryly. “This school isn’t just a martial arts school. It is a boarding school for those who wish to learn here. I have been offering traditional education for close to two decades now.”

“Please tell me that doesn’t mean flower arranging or anything like that? The girls were teasing us something fierce about that,” Ranma asked, her face scrunched up.

“My word, you really are a tomboy, aren’t you?” Atama chuckled, shaking her head. “No, we do offer etiquette, flower arranging and other electives. But you don’t have to take them. The mandatory classes are language arts, social studies, science and mathematics.”

Mai sighed, raising a hand quietly. “You’ll probably want to test me on those. I’ve been homeschooled. And Shampoo too. She’s Chinese, so...”

“Can you read Japanese, dear?” Atama inquired.

Shampoo nodded firmly, and Ranma snickered. "She's got a manga collection that she practices reading on."

This earned the redhead a punch in the arm, but Atama merely chuckled. "Education is where you find it."

She rang a small bell, and another woman came in. Atama talked to her for a few moments, and the woman left quickly. "Journeywoman Setsuna will ready tests for you all after this meeting."

She ignored Ranma's whine of fear with amusement and turned the conversation back to martial arts, which, Nawa was amused to note, made Ranma perk up right away. "Now, the second level deals with capture and combat. There again, you all have a major leg up on your fellow students, and this is where we will talk about payment."

Atama asked all three of the newcomers at that point to help train her students from the apprentice level on down. Even her two apprentices, which in her school was a level above journeyman, needed more real combat experience. So long as the three stayed here, they would help give her school that greater level of training to make them understand the difference between practice and real life. Atama was willing to train them in the escape-type ki techniques, some flexibility practices and weapons instruction. She felt all three would probably pick that last up very quickly.

"However, unless you have something to offer, I will not teach you any of my higher-end techniques," Atama finished firmly. "I have developed these techniques over time," *Primarily thanks to run-ins with Happosai, Tung Fu Rue and that fuck Gouken, but no need to go into detail now.* "And I will not share even my non-secret techniques with anyone without being paid for it commensurately."

"What if we had things techniques to trade. You mentioned interest in that," Ranma guessed.

Smirking inwardly at Ranma's question pushing the direction where she wanted it to go, Atama nodded somberly while internally doing a fist pump. "In that case, things are negotiable."

"We've all got the weapons space technique and can teach that," Ranma mused.

"I can even teach ... my boob window," Mai stated with a resigned sigh. "It's an advanced version of weapons space, but once you know the basics, creating a space between your skin and your clothing is simple enough, if a bit draining at first." She brightened then. "Or the creation of flashbangs and minor bombs?" *I can't teach them the Bunshin, that's a secret technique.*

“Shampoo wants know that one!” Shampoo snickered, grinning as Ranma blushed rosily, staring away from the two other girls as Atama hummed thoughtfully. “That technique look too too useful. Shampoo know some weapons combat, some medical knowledge.”

“We, Shampoo and I, have another technique we can probably show you, but it’s more a physical enhancement technique than anything else. But it is a really good one. We also have a few other talents that you might want to take advantage of.”

It took all of Shampoo’s skill to not gape at Ranma as she spoke, wondering what the redhead was talking about. *Has Ranma figured out a way to learn the Kachu Tenshin Amaguriken?*

“Hmm... I would like you to put on a demonstration of these techniques to myself and my apprentices. Rei should be back in a few days,” Atama mused. “When she does, we’ll talk about this enhancement technique. Anything else?”

Ranma talked about her Martial Arts Construction skills, which Master Nawa was also interested in taking advantage of. “There is some repair work I would like you to see to if you can. I won’t instruct you in the ki lengthening technique, but I won’t forbid my apprentices from using it in front of you. Fair?”

Nodding eagerly, Ranma agreed with that right away. While he needed to figure out a ki sight technique to really see what that technique was about, seeing it in action was enough for him. *After all, I doubt I’ll add a rope or chain weapon to my normal style, but even seeing it could teach me something else.*

“Good. In that case, please follow Setsuna. She will take you to the room where you will be given your various tests. After that, she will take you to your cottage.”

“Wait, our cottage?” Ranma questioned, her eyes widening. “You mean, er, we’ll all be together?”

“Indeed, you arrived together and will be bunked together. And frankly, we don’t have much room for guests at this time anyway,” Atama admitted.

The other two girls stood up, but Ranma was still protesting. “Wait, but I could like, build a cottage, you know.”

“Really, Ranma being silly. Shampoo already know Ranma snore, no big secret there.” Shampoo stood up with a grin, wrapping Ranma’s arm up with her own and dragging the redhead out of the room. “Now come on. Get painful bit over with, yes?”

“Nor would I want a new cottage put up. The school is good just the way it is,” Atama growled.

“By the way, you said there were four levels to your school’s teaching,” Mai asked as she began to help drag Ranma out. “What is the fourth one?”

Atama smirked, leaning back slightly, her gaze becoming almost half-lidded, most of her seriousness fading as she gave them what could only be called a sultry look. All three youngsters backed away, although Mai’s eyes widened, and she looked a little intrigued. Then the look on Atama’s face was gone, and she sets crisply, “Level four is the sensual side of Hotojutsu, where we enter the realm of deliberate eroticism. How you can question prisoners by driving them mad with pleasure how to use ropes in the bed just as well as the battlefield. I didn’t think any of you three would be interested, nor would I be willing to just teach such willy-nilly, so I didn’t mention it.”

Mai frowned thoughtfully. “I wonder if Andy would get into that kind of thing, either being tied up or by tying Andy up...” she mused aloud.

“If you want some **basic** lessons in that area, Miss Shiranui, I can include such instruction instead of something else. But I’m not going to teach you any of the esoteric arts in that area,” Atama answered firmly. “But go on with you now. You have tests to take.”

As they were led away, Mai looked around thoughtfully. “This place almost reminds me of my family’s dojo in its heyday. Of course, there are only two students by this point, and Andy’s got his own style on top of that. But even so, we still have the area and the dojo, no matter how empty it seems.”

“And this place has a lot of students. Although, I gotta wonder if that is due to the martial arts, or Atama’s willingness to mixed martial arts with actual schooling,” Ranma muttered. “I’ve never run into that before. Hell, it’s mostly been the opposite with the real styles.”

“Is good idea though. Same as what Shampoo get in village,” Shampoo enthused. Although part of her was annoyed that this place would undoubtedly put a crimp on her romance with Ranma, she was interested in getting to know so many serious martial artists. Although none of the acolytes had impressed her, they all seemed good-natured and earnest girls.

“Yeah, but it will slow down our training time,” Ranma whined, with a real air of grievance about her. “I left Nerima to get away from schooling and stuff.”

For her part, Mai was actually looking forward to going to school with others. Outside of elementary school, she’d been entirely home educated and was looking forward to trying to see if she could make friends here.

Ranma frowned, thinking about it, then sighed and nodded. By that point, they were out of sight of Atama, who had moved over to her window to watch the trio be led away.

Moving away from the window, Atama sat back at her desk, humming thoughtfully. *Amazon Wushu, interesting, and I'm glad to finally meet Lin's little girl. But Anything Goes, hmmm? She seems a nice girl, although it's obvious her school is still up to its old tricks. I wonder who took over for old Happosai? And what happened to the Undying Pervert? No way old age could have finally claimed him, not after who knows how many decades.*

OOOOOOO

In a distant cave, a diminutive creature sneezed near the entrance to the cave, where a large boulder had been placed, while around him wafted the horrendous odor of unwashed male underwear. "One of my disreputable students must be talking about me! When I get out of here..."

OOOOOOO

Ranma and the two other girls were at their various tests until around eleven o'clock. By then, Ranma was as wrung out mentally as he had ever been, and Shampoo's eyes had crossed. Even Mai was mumbling about "The numbers going to eat me..." as they were led away.

It was only when they arrived at one of the out-of-the-way cottages that Ranma remembered the next part of this predicament. *GAHHHHH!!!*

Before the aqua-transformo-sexual could protest, Setsuna had opened the door and ushered them inside. Ranma opened her mouth then, but Setsuna just waved and walked off to find her own bed. "Remember you three, we get up early here, so I'd suggest unpacking and getting to bed as soon as possible."

Ignoring Ranma's stammering, Shampoo looked around, nodding in approval. The cottage was simply laid out, but well made, built around a single main room serving as a bedroom. It had a small laundry and a bathroom. In the main room, the three cots were lined up in a row. But it was obvious that one of them had been squeezed into the room recently, and there was barely any room in the cottage's main room because of it and the other pieces of furniture, a small circular table, and a single small wardrobe.

Now done with her perusal, Shampoo turned to Ranma, asking innocently, "Why Ranma so red? It only us girls."

“You know perfectly well why,” Ranma growled. A wicked thought occurred to Ranma then, and deciding to take revenge for being stuck with the other two like this, she whirled, her fingers flickering out to tickle Shampoo’s side.

Surprised by the assault, the Amazon girl attempted to get away, only to find herself hemmed in by one of the beds. Soon she was being tickled mercilessly with Ranma using her greater strength and speed to pin the taller Amazon to the bed, tickling her mercilessly. Eventually, she gasped out, “**GIVE**, Shampoo give!”

Mai had watched this from the sidelines, partly amused, and part... something else Ranma couldn’t quite place. *Jealous maybe? But why would that be?*

“What brought that on?” the tallest girl in the room asked, warily standing by the door, ready to bolt if Ranma tried that with her. *I doubt she... he... will, not with how much Ranma reacted to Shampoo and I being tied up earlier. Ranma seems somewhat prudish. But I didn’t see him... her tickling Shampoo like that either.*

“UGH! First, this is just wrong. I might be in this form now, but remember I was born a guy,” Ranma grumbled, running her fingers through her hair as she moved to perch on the bed next to her girlfriend, who was now gasping and whimpering at sore ribs from how loud she had been laughing. “While... okay, sharing a room with Shampoo is something we’re working towards, sharing a room with her and you together? That’s just asking for trouble. And she knows it, the little temptress.”

That caused Mai to smile, oddly touched, while Shampoo muttered about Ranma of all people calling her little. Mai didn’t know very many people well, but she knew she was attractive and figured that the number of young men who would be willing to think of her feelings at a moment like this could be counted on the fingers of one hand. *Andy would, but he’d have just fled instead of sticking around... damn it.*

Not aware of Mai’s inner thoughts, Ranma smacked Shampoo on the leg. “Second, Shampoo **knows** that I don’t like to spend long periods of time in this form. If I could have gotten a room on my own, that could have given me time to...”

“**NO!**” Shampoo growled out, waving a finger in Ranma’s face. “Shampoo read enough manga know where that road leads. You stay in female form all time here, or else just asking for trouble. Or does Ranma want reverse of what happened at Furinkan happen here, huh?”

“...You mean girls coming after me with hot water instead of boys with cold?” Ranma asked, confused.

“Actually, I think she just meant you’d eventually just be found out, run out of the school. Along with us since we arrived with you. Even me,” Mai muttered, also having read enough manga to know how badly wrong this could go, a fact that was like, ironically, a cold

splash of water to the face. "Yeah, Ranma... you're better off just staying in female form the whole time you're here."

Ranma stared at her in betrayal, his blue eyes wide like a puppy's, and Mai had to bite her lip to not coo at how cute the short redhead looked at that moment. But she held strong, nodding her head as Shampoo spoke, explaining in no uncertain terms that this school would kick them out the moment that Ranma's curse was discovered.

After a few moments, Ranma subsided and reluctantly agreed with them on that point, although she still felt that they should have pushed for a second cottage. "If not for me, then for Mai. I mean, look how crowded this place is."

"Shampoo not mind sharing bed with Ranma, then get rid of one bed, yea?" Shampoo giggled but held up her hand as Ranma turned to pout at her. "Is joke!"

As Ranma leaned back, Shampoo went on in Chinese. "Actually, Ranma, I think we shouldn't be doing any romance-type activities here. I'm getting the impression that the girls here are very straight. If the conversation about this Donny Yen person that dominated the conversation in the commissary was anything to go by. And you heard Master Nawa, no illicit activities."

"Yeah, but judging from what level four of her training is, I think that's a bit of a wash, personally," Mai muttered, shaking her head in bemusement.

Shaking her head at that, Shampoo pointed a finger at Ranma. "But more importantly, you mentioned a speed technique to Master Nawa. What the heck are you thinking? I told you my Elders would have a problem with me sharing our techniques with you, let alone you sharing it with a complete stranger. I do want to go home at some point, Ranma, and if we share that..."

"It's not if your clan's technique is the only speed technique out there," Ranma argued back, causing Shampoo to nod agreement. "So long as we don't use your clan's training method, then I think we can get away with it. And remember what I said after we fought Honda-san. We need to work on our physicality. The Toughness training might not have worked well so far, and I don't think we'll get away with it here. But this kind of thing should be easier."

Shampoo was about to ask what kind of training Ranma had thought up, but Mai interrupted, asking, "Excuse me? Why are you talking as if you two fought with Yokozuna Honda-sama?"

"We did," Shampoo answered, before explaining the Street FIGHT aspect of their journey, and how they met Honda. At that point Ranma took up the tale.

By the end of the explanation, Mai was once more a little jealous, although it had nothing to do with the twosome's relationship any longer. "Huh, that's actually really amazing. Sumo wrestling isn't my sport, but Honda-san is still a national hero, and I rather think I'd like to meet him. Still, what would you need for this training of yours?"

"Hmm, I will need some props for my idea to work. A large fish tank and some fish, the smaller and faster the better. And those little net things you use at parties or festivals," Ranma counted off on her fingers. "The trick will be to dip out **all** the fish without getting the net broken. It will be good coordination and speed training. At least, I think so."

Mai crossed her arms under her breasts, bringing both of the other girls' attention to those objects, with even Shampoo staring for a moment. "Okay, I'll bite. I can get my hands on all that if we're allowed to head into town. I even have a ready-made excuse since I left some of my bags at the hotel, as I didn't expect the school to be so large or organized. But I want in on this training. What was its name again?"

"Chestnuts Roasting Over an Open Fire. Amazon Technique is, throw the chestnuts into a fire, pull them back out without getting hands burned," Shampoo answered promptly, still speaking in Chines.

Mai blinked, then blinked again, staring incredulously at Shampoo. "Are you Amazons all masochists?"

Shampoo blushed at that, then lashed out with a kick towards Mai, who ducked under it with a laugh. "Careful, there's not enough space in here to roughhouse, you know."

"I think we saw a pond on the way here. We'll need to remember to feed them," Ranma said, ignoring the antics of the two girls. "But I'll wager anything that this is still a lot easier than learning the Amazon way, Shampoo. And far less painful than the martial arts construction one."

Mai looked interested, but Shampoo shook her head, moving forward to put her few bits of clothing from her weapons space into the drawers of the wardrobe. "It involve pounding concrete with fist like jackhammer."

"Yeah, it's a good way to strengthen your hands but frankly, the pain of it gets too much to learn the speed technique part well," Ranma answered with a sigh.

Nodding thoughtfully, Mai followed Shampoo, noting the other girl needed some more clothing. Then she looked between her two new roommates thoughtfully. *I didn't see this coming, but why not take advantage of it to answer some questions that have been eating at my mind since we met.*

She hopped over to the bed, leaning against the headrest as she looked at Shampoo, one eyebrow rising and waving her hand at Ranma as she grinned. "Now that we're all situated here, though, we can talk about really important things. Romance! How did you two get together? Give me all the juicy details!"

Shampoo returned the taller girl's grin. Like most women, Amazons were prone to gossip. And her courtship with Ranma was, while really unusual, also very romantic. A part of her was worried that Mai might develop an interest in Ranma, but she hadn't seen any sign of that so far, so Shampoo was free to brag instead of just defend her territory.

For his part, Ranma just groaned and looked away when an embarrassed blush. While Ranma wasn't embarrassed by her relationship with Shampoo, there was a big difference between that and wanting to share it with someone else.

Unfortunately for Ranma, Shampoo ignored the redhead's discomfort and went into the details about their first meeting, their second meeting in the cave, and then their meeting on the rooftop of the Tendo place.

By its end, Mai clapped excitedly, then shook her head with a faint sigh. "Ooh, all that sounds amazing! I'm really happy that you two..." she sighed, shaking her head. "I wish that I had something similar."

Shampoo blinked, then stared Mai up and down, one eyebrow rising. "Shampoo think you probably could walk down street, whistle, and have choice of men from around Japan, let alone island."

It wasn't often that Shampoo found herself jealous of another woman's looks, but Mai was definitely gorgeous. *Although how she gets away with no back pain with those things is beyond me.*

"Hah, you'd think so, but the love of my life doesn't seem willing to, well do anything romantic anymore."

Shampoo made an interrogative noise while Ranma just lay on her bed, waiting for this torture to be over. Seeing Shampoo interested, Mai pulled out a picture of Andy Boggart, holding it out to Shampoo. Ranma glanced at it and saw a guy with long, strangely silverish hair, which Ranma thought was kind of girly. *And this is me sayin' it.*

Beyond that, Andy had a thin, almost arrogant bishounen face but with a smile on it when the picture was taken. He looked about college age, maybe a little younger, and had some descent muscles on him. *Still, muscles ain't everything.*

"This is Andy! He's a fellow student of my school, although he wasn't originally. He's only been with us for about six years or so. Before that, we knew each other as kids, but he was

learning his parent's style. ...Why that changed isn't my story to tell," she finished, frowning, her brown eyes darkening further before she shook her head and banished whatever memory had darkened them.

"And you're sweet on him," Shampoo said in Chinese.

Mai nodded firmly. "I love Andy, I have for years. And at first, he was kind of responding. But then he just... stopped."

From there Mai told the duo – or at least Shampoo – how she had become interested in Andy, how they had gone on a few dates and their training together.

Shampoo ate it up, gleeful at the idea of a childhood romance like that. However, as the tale went on, Shampoo began to see a problem with how Mai was. This sounded a little too much like a reversal of her relationship with Moose.

Only Mai's not blind and is one heck of a catch! Shampoo thought, her eyes straying down to Mai's chest again in jealousy. In everything but height and bust, Shampoo felt she wouldn't lose to Mai, but in those two areas, the Japanese girl was her superior. *Skilled, gorgeous, intelligent – she's able to speak Chinese! Grandmother would ask her to join the clan in a heartbeat.*

And Mai's next words washed away any connection between Mu Tzu and Mai there might have been.

"He doesn't tell me to stop, though!" Mai made certain to emphasize. "Andy doesn't tell me he's not interested or anything. He just looks uncomfortable, blushes and runs away. I don't know what changed. I keep trying to get Andy to be a little, you know, **proactive** romantic-wise, but he seems to only be interested in the martial arts and getting stronger."

Well, that's a big difference there! I never encouraged Mu Tzu or shown any interest in him. And I certainly have never blushed and run away. If what she's doing is making uncomfortable, he should just say so, not run away. That's not the way to respond to a woman's interest. And as for the rest...

Shampoo looked over at Ranma, snickering, but Ranma quickly held up her hands. "Don't put that evil on me! If I was just interested in the martial arts, I'd have never kissed you or invited you along on this trip. I just think that The Art is equally important and getting better in it should be my life's goal. But it's not my life's everything, and I'm more than willing to put effort into, er, other things, like our relationship."

"I see," Mai muttered, while Shampoo melted just a bit at Ranma's words and the shy look the redhead was giving her. "You lucky bitch."

Shampoo flashed the V sign at Mai, not taking her curse seriously. "What have you tried so far?"

"Well, for a while, I waited for him to make a move after we had gone on a few karaoke dates. He never did. So, I started to flirt with him in more and more outgoing ways. He just keeps on blushing and stammering and running away," Mai sighed, shaking her head.

"Is that why you're here?" Ranma snickered. "You think tying him down will force him to give you a straight answer?"

"Yes," Mai answered bluntly. "Something like that anyway. If he doesn't want to open his presents, I'll by God make him mine!"

She looked at her two listeners closely, searching for irritation with that idea or revulsion at her outgoing stance. But she didn't see any, instead seeing Shampoo cackling aloud at her wording.

With the worries about Mai's advances being wholly unwanted out of the way, to Shampoo, the way Mai described her courtship of Andy was precisely how a normal Amazon would go about courting a foreign male. *Indeed, if Ranma hadn't responded to my kiss as he did or come up with this whole training journey thing, I'd probably be just as forward with him.*

On the other hand, Ranma simply shrugged, unconcerned about it, as this wasn't his issue. "If this guy's serious about the martial arts, it would be nice to have a rival. You think you could introduce me to him so we can spar a bit."

"You should've come up with a different way of saying that given the form you're wearing," Mai teased, and Ranma shuddered, grabbing the nearby pillow and hurling it at Mai's face with unerring accuracy, causing the large breasted woman to flop sideways onto her side with a whoop.

When she sat back up, Mai asked hesitantly, "So neither of you see a problem with a woman chasing a man rather than vice versa?"

Shampoo laughed and explained her reasoning on that score, while Ranma simply shrugged. "You might not be acting like a traditional Yamato Nadeshiko, but martial artists aren't supposed to be traditional. If Andy is looking for that kind of thing, he should've already indicated that he wasn't interested in you, and I'm not talking about just running away blushing. I think he's just embarrassed and unable to, you know, deal with feelings."

Mai to looked at Shampoo. "You really lucked out, didn't you?" While Shampoo just looked smug, Mai decided it was time to change the subject. "Anyway, we've talked about romance enough for now. What about fashion? I love that outfit you're wearing, but I have to

say that it's probably more for hard use than anything else. What do you Chinese Amazons wear for special occasions?"

Shampoo happily replied, asking Mai about her own outfit, how much of it was based on fashion and how much of it was psychological warfare. The two of them laughed at that, as Mai explained how often her outfit had helped her in a fight distracting her opponents.

At first Ranma tried to not to listen to the conversation for many reasons, looking over the math textbook they had been given and trying to figure it out, before finally getting up and heading outside to exercise. She came back in an hour later only to instantly turn back around as the two girls had apparently started to compare bra types, as well as what colors were sexiest. A contest Mai won much to Shampoo's chagrin.

Shampoo's bust had grown a bit since the last time she'd bought a bra, and she hadn't actually brought more than a few changes of clothing with her, when chasing Ranma and Genma. The young Amazon had actually been very grateful for the school lending them some training clothing.

Both girls looked up, then blinked at the redheaded after image as the door closed behind Ranma. They looked at one another, then began to laugh, shaking their heads.

This is going to be a long stay, isn't it? Ranma groaned outside the door, banging her head against the outer wall of the cabin.

OOOOOOO

The next day, training began early. Really, really embarrassing training.

"The best way to learn is by doing! So we're going to be tying each of you up, assigning you to a journeywoman, and working you through how to flex your body and muscles in order to escape from various normal capture methods. And then we'll be walking you through the few that you can't escape through with mere physical means and teaching you how to use our ki escape techniques," Atama's senior apprentice Yukari, explained as she led the new Trio into a classroom on the first floor of the same building.

"Are all three of us going to be the same room?" Mai asked innocently. While she knew that Ranma was at the moment a woman and had spent the night sleeping in a bed in the same room as the boy-turned girl, Mai also knew that Ranma was mentally a guy given the way he had blushed and stammered at times. And the way they were 'captured' by Master Nawa the day before had been incredibly erotic, even to Mai.

On the one hand, watching Ranma die of blood loss would be hilarious, but on the other hand, I'm not certain I would be very comfortable with her looking at me like that in more controlled situations. Other than Andy, of course. Or that Shampoo wouldn't try to kill me or

everyone else if he did. She's got a good handle on it, but I've seen a few flashes of that girl's jealousy and it's best not to poke the sleeping bear.

"No." Yukari opened the door to the classroom, and Mai and the others looked inside, seeing that it had been partitioned out into small cubicles, providing privacy to everyone going through this training. "You'll have to break out of your bonds in front of several journeywoman and a crowd of your peers when you complete this training, but to begin with, you'll only have your instructor. We know it's embarrassing."

"Are you going to be all right with this?" Shampoo asked in Chinese to Ranma. "I know that you're still a little leery about... you know, being touched and stuff in your female form, and this is going to be going quite a way beyond that."

She had spoken slowly enough that Ranma could pick up most of her words and Ranma nodded, oddly philosophical about things. "The ropes aren't another person, so that's not going to set me off, and while I'm more interested in tying up a certain old man of our acquaintance so that he can't get away, learning it from this side of things is also a good idea. And it really can help with your flexibility, you know."

Mai and Shampoo blinked at that, then looked at one another and laughed. Ranma stared at them, wondering what was going on, but the two naturally born girls waved the redhead off. And after a moment, Ranma shrugged and entered her own little cubicle, where she was greeted by one of the matronly journeywomen, thankfully. *Oh thank goodness it ain't the Ganguro girl.*

Throughout the day, the three girls were put through their paces in terms of escaping from various Hotojutsu style incarcerations, as well as regular things. This ranged from simply tying their wrists together behind them, tying their elbows and knees and ankles together, chaining their hands together, even using zip ties. That last was a new one to all three, but the journeywomen explained that this part of the course was actually designed to be taught to young women who, through family connections or other reasons, were in danger of being kidnapped. Thus, being able to break out like this could help save their lives or virtue and was normally accompanied by further resistance training to various illegal drugs. That training was open to the three martial artists too, but after discussion they all agreed it wasn't necessary.

"I mean, building up immunity to various knockout gases and stuff could be interesting, but I don't know how necessary it is for me. I'd started to build up an immunity to that dealing with Kodachi back in Nerima," Ranma said that night, only to be interrupted by Shampoo.

"Blllllittttccchhhh,....." the Amazon drawled causing Mai to stare at her and lean forward eagerly to ask what had caused that reaction.

It took a while to get back to the topic at hand, but it turned out that both Mai and Shampoo had built up an extreme immunity to that kind of thing as part of their previous

training. "Amazons always be pretty, so be in danger of kidnapping from young age. Immunity to drugs and stuff be simple enough to build," Shampoo opined, making no mention of a pair of rather annoying twins of her acquaintance.

"Yes, and I've built up an immunity to gases and other things as part of my training in Shiranui-Ryu. If you two go forward with your plan to leave with me and head south again, I can help you built that immunity up when we arrive at my home in Kyushu," Mai added.

On top of that, for the most part, the trio proved that they were already flexible or strong enough in Ranma's case to flex out of the ropes. That surprised the watching journeywoman, who wondered aloud if that was cheating. "And how the heck is someone so small so strong?"

Eventually though they did start to run into things that none of the three could just break out of, and the accompanying journeywoman started to instruct them in various ways to move or flex their bodies to weaken the ropes binding their bodies. "Eventually, you'll get to the point where you could even use these moves on wire-based capture techniques," one of the trainers explained, somewhat shocked at how quickly the trio of newcomers were learning the techniques.

After the morning training, the three of them were forced into classes for the afternoon, and then an early dinner was followed by more instruction. This instruction took the form of using ropes or chains as weapons. Here once more the trio had such a large head start in this training, so much so, they were quickly relegated to training solely with Master Nawa and Yukari.

Part of this training though was how to use grapnels, ropes or kusarigama not only to fight, but to help them travel along. Mai took one look at Master Nawa, the coils of rope on her arms having dropped down and now forming into hooks and grapnel as she moved around the forest, and shook her head, a wry grin on her face. "Good grief! It's like watching a knockoff Spiderman! When paired with my own family's style, being that maneuverable will be incredible."

To Mai's shock Ranma asked, "Who's Spiderman?" while Shampoo also looked quizzical.

"I need to introduce you two to American comics. They're not as deep as Japanese graphic novels can be, but they have some amazing characters and combat scenes."

"What overall plot like?" Shampoo asked, watching avidly as Master Nawa move back through the forest to them, and gestured them to pick up several long grapnels for themselves.

Mai chuckled shaking her head. "What overall plot? There's an overall theme to most of those comics, but not an overall plot."

"Shampoo give it a miss then. But want be first to try this, yes?" The Amazon said, twirling the rope.

Ranma did the same, but in her case, she closed her eyes for a brief second, and then pulsed some ki into the rope. Atama saw this, and her eyes widened in surprise. "You did not mention that you already had some instruction in adding your energy into your weapons."

"I've seen it used more often than I have actually used it myself. I had this rival, who liked to use bandannas as weapons. He could make them into these weird boomerang things, or use them as clubs," Ranma explained, before moving to one side of Shampoo. "On something this big, that's going to be way tougher."

And rope-based movement didn't imply just moving over and through trees. Atama showed them how to use chains or ropes like giant springs, hurling themselves over obstacles or straight up far higher than even Ranma could jump. And they could even be used to move over to traps and spikes.

That was a little too specific an exercise for Ranma's tastes, not to mention the concentration needed. But swiftly shifting from using them to move to using them as an added layer of protection, which you could charge with your ki? That was interesting.

The first few times they tried to use the ropes to travel were not pretty. Even Ranma's training in moving through the forest wasn't quite up to moving that quickly while trying to control and use ropes to travel. The ropes kept on getting tangled, and his attempt to use his ki to control them failed miserably. That required a level of ki control that Ranma could barely imagine let alone use.

Shampoo too had trouble, her reflexes failing her. In contrast, Mai was able to use the ropes to travel, pretty well, but couldn't deal with the strength needed to keep going after the first ten minutes, her arms aching under the strain. And she too had control issues, the ropes becoming even more tangled than Ranma had.

However, by the end of the second day all three of them had shown improvement, which was all Atama wanted. She released them to do their homework for the regular class and reminded all three, while pointedly looking at Ranma, that they weren't allowed to slack off in that classwork if they wanted to keep learning from her school.

Ranma was still annoyed by that, but the other two girls were more willing to go along with it and convinced Ranma to do the same. However, she did spend an hour practicing the speed technique with the fish and the water.

Over the next few days, Master Nawa proved to be a very good teacher, as did most of her journeymen and Yukari, who, by all rights, should have been a master herself. The three newcomers built on their better starting point swiftly and within two days began to surpass

most of the others in the various training exercises. Eventually it got to the point where Master Nawa was having Shampoo and Mai teach classes to several of the others on the weapons space far faster than she had expected.

The cleavage window that Mai had learned was a hit among the girls, after several long minutes of giggling, anyway. And Shampoo's own knowledge of the energy space was just as good. By the end of the first week, Yukari and Master Nawa had both shown progress in ki-space technique, and Master Nawa had agreed to teach the trio her ki-growth technique. This was the technique that would allow them to extend a rope or chain-based weapon. She did warn them however, that the technique was both ki intensive and hard to master.

"It calls for a control none of you have, although you might be closer to the power requirement than I was when I was your age," Atama half-warned, half-grumbled.

To Ranma's continued disgruntlement however, he did not join them in this training. Instead, she was forced into remedial classes. It turned out that Ranma's writing, both in terms of actual handwriting, and writing skill, were not up to what Atama wanted anyone at her school to have, no matter how long they would actually be there.

The redhead grumbled on this point on the sixth evening of their stay at Musubime Osoroshi rubbing her dominant hand's wrist in annoyance. "Seriously, what is up with the handwriting thing?! I mean come on, how important is that to a martial artist? I don't got anyone I'd write a letter to, I ain't the kind to issue formal challenges, hell, I don't even pay taxes."

"Who knows, given your tales about weird styles, maybe Ranma running into martial arts calligraphy in future?" Shampoo teased, while Mai choked at that last point, blinking and frowning her brow as she wondered if her school actually paid taxes too. Despite her own writing ability in Japanese not being very good, Shampoo's actual calligraphy was very neat and tidy.

Ranma stared at the other girl, then slowly shook her head. "Why do you have to tempt fate like that?"

Coming back to the conversation from her minor mental dead-end Mai snickered, sitting back on the bed, as she turned her attention back to her math homework. "That would be kind of amusing to watch. Although I have no idea what kind of practical skills a martial arts calligraphy style would teach you. Maybe forgery, but that's not exactly an everyday combat-type skill."

Done going over her homework and satisfied with much of it, Mai set it aside a moment later, leaning back against the head rest of the bed. With three beds in here, there was only enough space for a small dresser and an equally small table, with no room for actual chairs. "So,

how do you all think the training is going? We've been here a week, I figure that's long enough to get a feel for it."

"Eh, pretty good. I'm not exactly happy about the whole splitting our time thing, but I think we're all getting the hang of what you keep on calling 'imitation Spiderman'. We're supposed to be starting to spar with some of the journeywoman tomorrow, weapons only, which should be cool," Ranma answered.

Listening to the redhead, Mai had to hide a giggle. Despite his curse, Ranma still spoke like a guy, and it always struck her as funny, especially when Ranma was trying to work on her homework, biting her lip and shifting in her chair like a little girl wanting to run outside. "I really like those rope javelins, and might want to start carrying one around. But I'm not so happy about our ki manipulation stuff."

Shampoo spoke up then. "Ranma be patient. Ranma learn best by watching, then doing, yes? In ki manipulation, no able to see, so it hard. But it barely a week, give it time."

"Personally, I thought it'd be going faster since we all already have experience in using ki consciously. Still, if you're both having trouble with it at least that makes me feel a little better. I thought my training with the boob window and Bunshin would allow me to pick up this whole diverting ki to a specific point would faster, but I'm having a lot of trouble pushing it out of my body at so small a specific point beyond my hands. That's kind of annoying," Mai grumbled.

Ranma nodded, although her face was thoughtful as she leaned back against the wall beside her bed, setting her own work down on the small desk between her bed and Shampoo's. Shampoo's was pushed almost directly against Mai's, barely leaving enough room on that side for Shampoo to stand up.

Seeing Ranma's thoughtful expression, Shampoo asked her boyfriend-currently-girlfriend what she was thinking.

"I think that maybe we're going about this all wrong. I mean, I don't know about you Mai, but when it comes to ki stuff, Shampoo and I are basically making it up as we go along. Other than the fact that it's tied into general health, we don't have any idea how to build it up, or how much normal people have."

"... Hmmm, that is true. My grandfather taught me about ki, how to meditate and connect with it, but we haven't talked about how to build my reserves other than general exercise and general meditation yet. We're supposed to this summer when he returns, but that hasn't happened yet. What are you getting at?" Mai asked, her eyes narrowed as she stared at the redhead.

"Why do we need to bother with moving our ki around our body to a specific point? Yeah, that could allow you to you know escape without anyone the wiser, but if getting out of

the binding is the main thing, then why can't we just... pulse it out from our bodies?" Ranma mused.

"Unshaped? Unformed? That sounds weird," Shampoo answered bluntly. "And really exhausting."

"Maybe, maybe not. I'm thinking of these Wuxia films I saw while me and my Pops were in China." Shampoo made an interrogative noise, and Ranma explained some of them, and one or two of them Shampoo had seen as well. While remote, her village did actually get some TV channels, although most of them were Chinese Communist Party propaganda.

Back on track Ranma went on. "Anyway, in those films, the people were able to release their ki bursts, not formed like an attack, but still powerful enough to fling their enemies around. It, it could work..."

With that, Ranma hopped to her feet, then hopped up onto the table, which allowed her to have some more room. She then mimed a fight, where an opponent hit her and Ranma let loose with some kind of energy, trying to describe the scene she had seen in the movie.

"That sound even tougher than pulsing out ki from one point, Ranma," Shampoo said disparagingly. "Also, seem to imply that Ranma have ki to spare."

Mai frowned thoughtfully, but didn't say anything, unsure what to think.

Ranma nodded, and hopped off the bed still looking thoughtful, heading towards the door. "I'm going to go train for a bit."

The two girls stared at one another, then Mai asked, "do you think she'll do it?"

Shampoo looked out the window, then shrugged her shoulders. "Shampoo learning never bet against Ranma. Unpredictable is her middle name."

The two of them fell silent, as Shampoo finished the last of her homework, then Mai asked hesitantly, "So, Ranma said at one point you have some manga you have on you? I don't suppose we could work up a trade, hmm?"

Shampoo nodded, and reached into her bag, pulling out some of the mangas in her collection. Soon after trading titles between them, the two girls were reading excitedly, laughing and joking together. After the last week, both of them were well on their way to becoming friends, despite Shampoo being a little concerned about the good-looking Shiranui girl living in such cramped conditions with Ranma, female form or not.

The next day, when they were going through their escape training again in the morning, Ranma closed her eyes, ignoring the words of the journeywoman assigned to her for the

moment. Instead, she concentrated inwardly, feeling the thrum of her ki within her. Then, as Ranma's breathing and heartrate slowed, she waited a brief second, before thrusting her ki out of her body. That was the easiest way of describing it. It was like Ranma was standing in the middle of a deep pool that was also her, and she pushed her will outward, splashing water everywhere.

It worked far better than Ranma had anticipated. The ropes binding her body exploded outward, sending torn bits in every direction, causing the journeywoman to stumble back in surprise. Ranma then hopped to her feet, before swaying woozily. "Oooh, okay, maybe that's a little tougher to do than I expected."

"... I think I'm going to go get Master Nawa," the apprentice muttered, shaking her head. "I don't know if that counts Ranma."

Moments later, Atama was there, and the journeyman explained what had happened. Listening, she shook her head. "I knew the three of you were strong, I didn't thought you were that strong in terms of your ki, Ranma."

"I'm not," Ranma shook her head. "I wasn't making any headway in the whole moving ki through my body and pulsing it out at specific points thing. So, I thought about just pulsing it out in general. That doesn't mean I'm strong or anything, just taking your training in a different direction."

"Yes, it does mean you're strong. I doubt anyone below Rei and Yukari could to this, and still be able to move," Atama answered dryly before pausing a moment as she considered things.

"Still, it's strange. Women and men learn how to use ki in slightly different ways. Men, generally speaking have more, but struggle with fine control. Women have fine control, but struggle to build up their ki," Atama mused, staring around the cubicle and not noticing Ranma's twitch. "Still, despite what Tatsumi says, I think we can say that this was a successful training exercise."

But Ranma shook her head. "No way. I'm exhausted! I don't think I could put myself through a single fight right now, let alone try to complete an escape or whatever. I need to practice this." *But I think I really am onto something here. Something way bigger than just a way to get out of ropes or chains. Hehehehe...*

Atama looked at Ranma shaking her head. "If you wish to do so, I'm not going to stop you. But I think what you're talking about is the need to build up ki, and there I am afraid I cannot help you. Beyond exercise and general meditation, I do not know of any way of building ki. And frankly, you might already have almost as much as my apprentices if you are able to do this. And I thought Shampoo and Mai had a decent ki reserves for their age." She mock-scowled, shaking her head. "Some girls have all the luck."

Again, Ranma just shrugged, trying to avoid Master Nawa's eyes for a moment, as she slumped down. "I suppose just meditation for now, then?"

"Perhaps. Although I have heard of specific mental exercises that can help you enlarge your ki reserves, as well as various... well I believe they're called cultivation methods these days. Not certain about those," Atama shrugged before wagging a finger at Ranma. "Just don't let it get away of the rest of your education Ranma. You're already behind as it is."

The young redhead's groan was music to Atama's ears.

Life at the school continued, with Atama pushing the Trio into enlarging the group they were teaching the ki space to, and vice versa as their agreement dictated. By the second week, Shampoo and Mai and Ranma had all mastered the speed technique training, which they then shared with Master Nawa and her most senior apprentices.

Their training with the schools' non-linear weapons also proceeded apace, with each of them acquiring skills with one or more. Shampoo began to use a chain-based meteor hammer, which she could connect to her chui-based wushu. Mai preferred a manriki, which she could use as defense rather than offense, already using throwing daggers in her normal style. While Ranma enjoyed using the rope darts, which she could use both for long range attacks and defense. Although only Shampoo felt that she would work her chosen weapon into her everyday style, Mai and Ranma thinking their new skills would be good situational weapons, especially when added to their ki-space.

By the end of their third week, all three were training in enhancing their weapons with ki. Eventually they would be able to stop attacks up to and including bullets.

Unfortunately for Ranma, her regular education time continued to take up half their time the school, and her annoyance with that was apparent every evening, causing Shampoo and Mai to tease the redhead mercilessly. Both of them actually enjoyed the school aspect, getting to know the other young girls here, and while as outsiders there was a bit of building jealousy, their personalities kept it from building quickly.

But for all three of them, it proved to be in sparring with the locals and one another where they had the most fun and improved the quickest.

Of course given the combat abilities all three of the newcomers had shown, Atama did not make the mistake of putting them against anyone else, instead, pairing them against one another. Thus four days after they arrived, Ranma and Mai stood across from one another.

Thankfully for Ranma's sensibilities, Mai had donned one of the local outfits, which, while formfitting, didn't distract Ranma so much. So the redhead was able to fully concentrate on her actual fighting abilities rather than the physics defying question of how the heck her outfit stayed on.

"Get her Airen!" Shampoo shouted from the sidelines, where she, Atama and much of the rest of the Musubime Osoroshi school stood, watching eagerly. Atama had ordered several of them to take actual notes about the spar to share with the others, and had broadly hinted that they would be quizzed on their observations afterwards.

"Ready to get beaten Red?" Mai taunted, flicking out her fan to one side, twirling in place, before taking up a stance. It was a low crouch, with one foot forward, her fan open by her head, her other hand thrust forward, empty at the moment.

It looked like something from a more ostentatious version of Tai Chi, but Ranma knew better than to take that as a given. From what little Ranma had seen of Mai, a lot of the Shiranui style was in throwing off the opponent, luring them into false assumptions.

You wish! Ranma Saotome doesn't lose!" Ranma retorted, standing there in her own loose, seemingly bored pose.

But Mai too had seen Ranma in action, and knew that pose was a faint just as much as her own, and that Ranma was both faster and stronger than her. *Keep Ranma on the ground, or if she's in the air, back away quickly. Try not to get in a straight contest up close with her if you can avoid it.*

"Enough posing. Begin!" Atama said from the sidelines, chopping her hand forward without any preamble.

With that, Mai shot forward, but paused halfway to Ranma. Her hand pulsing slightly with ki she tossing her fan like it was a dagger ahead of her, the closed fan seeming to multiply in the air. "Bunshin no Jutsu!"

The number of copied fans however mattered not at all as Ranma just leaped over the lot of them. Twirling to one side, Mai dodged his attack, and was suddenly holding a long spear, thrusting it forward.

There were shouts of surprise from many of the students who hadn't seen this trick in action before, unlike the Bunshin, which Mai had used in the woods. Even Shampoo had to nod. Having a weapons space that was so large as to have a spear in it was impressive. *Back home, Mousse is the only one to have a large enough ki space for that kind of thing, although of course his space is far larger than that.*

Beside her, Atama frowned as she saw that it was a real spear, its spear tip visibly sharp. She was about to halt the match but stopped as Ranma weaved out of the way, his hand flashing to the side into the spear tip and shattering the wood right behind the tip with a punch, before he moved in.

But Mai had already dropped her weapon, and met Ranma with several forearm blocks and palm jabs, followed by a rising knee that Ranma blocked, using its momentum to hop into the air.

Seeing this, Mai threw herself backwards, flipping several times and lashing out with a kick once when Ranma closed. Ranma blocked it and use the momentum to remain in the air but Mai kept on retreating. Then, when Ranma tried to close once more still in the air, she threw several Bunshin-multiplied daggers in his direction, using the distraction to get away from the edge of the training area.

By the time Ranma dealt with those, she was back across the training area from her, twin fans open and ready in her hands. *Dammit! Ranma's mastery of the that aerial style of hers is so bizarre! How can she remain in the air for so long, and just catch my real throwing daggers and ignore the copies somehow. Even my grandfather couldn't do both at once. And my forearms are freaking numb just from a few exchanges.*

Ranma on the other hand was surprised that she had modified her own attack so quickly to try and negate his aerial style. Few people Ranma had encountered were so quick to adapt to it, even though it was obvious that Mai couldn't actually deal with it. *That knee attack was interesting too. That almost felt like a Muay Thai strike.*

This time, it was Ranma who rushed forward, and decided to use some of the Hotojutsu style that they had been learning. From her wrist, a length of rope two yards long and thick around as Ranma's wrists came out, and she whirled, lashing out before she reached Mai.

Surprised, Mai leaped up, then realized her mistake as Ranma kicked up off of the ground, the rope flashing again towards Mai. Mai's fans became as hard as steel as she channeled ki into them using something that Atama had been teaching them, and she sliced into the rope, cutting it away even as she flipped through the air away from Ranma, who followed up.

She landed while Ranma was still in the air, but ducked to the side, and once more pulled a spear out of her boob window, hurling it up towards Ranma. Mai also tossed up to smoke bombs, which went off in Ranma's face.

Charging into the smoke, Mai's fans landed several hard blows on Ranma's forearms and chest, pushing the redhead back, but Mai suddenly found her hand gripped in one of Ranma's, and pulled in. *Crap! That's what I get for not sticking to the plan!*

Several elbow and knee shots were exchanged, with Ranma realizing quickly that this was also part of Mai's style. It did indeed seem like she had added some Muay Thai into the Shiranui-Ryu. A second later, she broke the hold, and tried for her own, while also lashing out with a palm strike towards Ranma's throat.

Ranma dodged it, then tapped her on the forearm as it passed, causing Mai to over balance just a tiny bit. The redhead then was able to get in a shot to Mai's stomach which doubled her over with a gasp of pain. Another blow to the side of her head followed, hurling Mai out of the smoke to land on the ground, where she rolled, groaning.

Even so, the heir to the Shiranui style pushed to her feet, in pain but still game. She was just about to send another hail of fans at Ranma as he leaped up out of the smoke, but Atama shouted, "That's enough!"

When the two looked towards her, Ranma landing nearby, Atama shook her head ruefully. "As fascinating a match as that was, and while I liked the fact that both of you incorporated some of the things you have already learned here, I think it was a little too fast... and hidden..." she mock-glared at a sheepish Mai, "for much of my students here to get much out of it. From now on, we'll try to limit this kind of spar to once a week, and have the two of you spar against myself or Rei."

Of the two senior apprentices, Rei was both the younger and most physical.

Mai and Ranma glared challengingly at one another, but Mai then sighed, shook her head, and stood up, cracking her back. This obviously thrust her chest forward in a way that made Ranma turn away to look back at Atama. Even with the clothing she was currently wearing, that was a bit much. "I suppose you're right Master Nawa. We did kind of fall back into our own styles there for a bit."

"Don't take this as a criticism Mai. You both fought very well, and you **were** incorporating what I've been teaching you these past few days. But I think you just realized something yourselves. Adding new abilities to your personal styles is something that will only occur over time, not quickly, yes?"

Both of the combatants nodded in rueful agreement, and it was proven the very next day that Shampoo had actually incorporated more of Master Nawa's training with binding and other techniques than Mai or Ranma had. indeed, Shampoo actually scored a full victory on Ranma.

When Ranma moved in for the kill, Shampoo suddenly bound one of her arms to her side throwing off his landing. The next second a blow from her chui put the redhead on the ground before she could rip in his way free.

In contrast, when Shampoo tried the same trick early on her battle with Mai, Mai's use of her daggers and a kusarigama negated Shampoo's use of a meteor hammer.

But all three of them greatly enjoyed the sparring and got a lot out of it, although what Mai got out of it was slightly more limited than what Ranma and Shampoo did. Mai realized quite quickly that both of her companions outstripped her in strength and speed. She was close

to Shampoo in strength, but Shampoo was wicked quick. And Ranma's basic physical abilities completely outmatched her own. So, while Ranma or even Shampoo were struggling with some of the regular education stuff, Mai could be found in the weight training room, working out there to the best of her abilities.

Alas, that first night the only night full of embarrassments for Ranma. Indeed, it was very odd to have a day go by during their time at Musubime Osoroshi without Ranma blushing so much it hurt at least a few times per day. Sharing a room with two gorgeous young women was not nearly as much fun as it sounded, especially when Ranma was in the form of a young woman currently, but thankfully, Mai and Shampoo understood that Ranma was still very much a guy in her head.

And yes, that was somewhat confusing to them all occasionally.

Regardless, they didn't come out of the showers in just towels or naked. They didn't try to rope Ranma into their conversations on fashion and movie stars, only asking his opinion about music or food when those topics came up. And they made a point of only talking about such things occasionally. Most of the time their conversations was about traveling, The Art, and cooking. They even helped Ranma out when she slipped up, not knowing some piece of information she should as a young woman or covering for Ranma when it came to not joining the others in the bath.

Although there were still incidents, of course. Some martial arts classes they took with the rest of the acolytes to build flexibility were so bad Ranma had to excuse herself several times or let people notice her nosebleed. Misaki seemed to have it in for Ranma and tried every other day to ambush or annoy the redhead. Ranma also did have to bath and coming up with reasons for not going in with the other girls got old quickly, even with Mai and Shampoo's help. As did bathing very late at night or just with super-cold showers and not just entirely thanks to Ranma's curse. Just because they were helpful did not detract from the fact Ranma was sharing a very small room with two beautiful girls, after all. And Shampoo was a cuddler. Enough said.

But those were just the incidents involving Ranma's curse or hormones. There was also the time where her and Mai's period coincided. While Rama had dealt with this particular horror before and knew what to do, her emotional and impulse control still went out the window. That was made worse by Mai's, which made her a rage monster. The rest of their time at the school had Ranma using her spare time to repair the damages the two had caused.

Thankfully for all concerned, Shampoo was actually quite docile around her time of the month. She dealt with a good deal of pain, but little emotional turmoil.

However, within a month of their stay, all three of them were at the point where they either had to devote themselves to the school to learn more, or come up with more in trade, and none of them could. Ranma's new 'ki wind' (temporary name) technique was too energy

intensive for any of them to use, although Ranma felt that Shampoo was closest to it of all of the women there, bar Atama, who could use it. But as she had warned Ranma, the older woman had been extremely drained from the exercise.

As a past hand at having outsiders around like this, Master Nawa had seen this moment coming and one evening called the Trio to her office. "You're at the point where you all need to either make a decision or leave." She began without preamble. "While Mai and Shampoo's general character has slowed it down, there is a slowly growing undercurrent of resentment and annoyance with how quickly you three, all outsiders, have taken to our training. And I know full well that none of you are willing to join our school full-time, are you?"

Ranma shook her head firmly gesturing to Shampoo. "The two of us are on a training journey. We're not going to be tied to any single school, and you're right, we're at the point where we need to think about moving on."

Mai hesitated. "I.. a part of me would like to stay. I've liked my time here, but I do have a duty to my own family's martial arts style so I can't just join another school. There's really no one else to take it on besides me. Andy might've been learning from our style, but he's got his own martial arts school to take up.

"I thought you said he had an older brother?" Ranma questioned.

"He does, but Terry has no interest whatsoever in actually becoming a teacher. And he's like the two of you, always travelling, although in his case he prefers to fight yakuza types and street fights to gain experience rather than searching out real martial arts schools. He's always on the move, never settling down as Andy has."

Despite a somewhat disparaging tone, Mai looked whimsically sad at that. She and Shampoo had several conversations over the past few weeks, including Ranma in them sometimes, when he wasn't busy with his homework anyway. Most of those conversations were about traveling, and the sheer fun that could be had being footloose and free. Traveling wasn't always sunshine and rainbows, but it was certainly far more interesting than staying home with her grandfather or Jubei, even if you took away her annoyance at Jubei's perverted attitude.

Shampoo said nothing. In point of fact, she was getting a little annoyed of late. Part of that was because her monthly cycle had just passed but a majority was because she and Ranma had not had **any** time together here. There just wasn't enough privacy. Even though Mai had offered to step out of the room for that kind of thing, there was always someone coming in and asking questions about the speed technique, general training or whatever.

Shampoo had also been leery about initiating anything with the reluctant Ranma around so many other girls who could possibly react negatively. She knew that wouldn't happen among

Amazons course, but among these Japanese girls, with the general prudishness the Japanese had towards showing affection? Who knew?

"In that case, I have a proposal that could earn you all some cash before you go." Atama went on, interrupting Shampoo's thoughts.

While Mai didn't look all that interested, while Shampoo did. After all, more cash was always a good thing, and Ranma had spent almost all of their money they'd had before traveling here on food that ended up getting ruined by his father's ambush. For her part though, Ranma just shrugged. "I'd be interested more in taking some of the weapons you've got here, but what exactly are you wanting us to do?"

"There are reports occurring around the island of two incidents I want you to look into. One is a wild animal sighting. There appears to be a panda somewhere on the island, stealing food and especially drinks for some reason. People assume he's some kind of escaped animal from a zoo, but no one has any idea how a panda got on the island at all, and the authorities are concerned, as the park rangers on the island don't have tranquilizers or anything of that nature. They apparently ordered them, but..." Atama shrugged. "The joys of bureaucracy. They won't be given any without any actual picture of the animal, and they haven't gotten that lucky yet."

Ranma bit back a groan, but Shampoo couldn't stop herself from clasping her head in her hands. Atama looked at her quizzically, but Shampoo just waved her off, and Ranma spoke for them both. "...Okay we'll look into that. And what was the second thing?"

"More of the same really. There's been another report of some kind of food thief going around in Sado the city. All that's known is that it's a blur, but one that's generally human-shaped. Regardless, the town mayor passed on the request that I send some of my girls out to look into this. And I thought of you three."

All three nodded indicating they understood. Even when compared to her most senior apprentices, Shampoo, Ranma and Mai were far more effective combatants. The apprentices were dangerous if they had any kind of range to deal with or worked together, but if not, then all three of the girls would win, simply because they could take more damage. That had become apparent over the last week, and was yet another thing stoking the fire of the slowly building jealousy that Master Nawa wished to head off by helping these three on their way.

"We'll do it." Ranma spoke up again nodding over to Shampoo who nodded back, miming beating something with her mace for a moment that won a smirk from the redhead. "If you have any information on where this second food thief is, or where the panda was last spotted, that would be a major help"

It turned out that the panda had actually been spotted several times moving around the national park all around the school. That was also a reason why Atama was worried. Mostly

pandas were if not gentle, then certainly not the type of animal to attack humans. But this one had apparently barged into several picnic sites and scared off the humans for their food.

Leaving Master Nawa's office and returning to their room, Mai turned to the other two, crossing her arms under her impressive bust. Ranma tried hard not to notice this as the redhead joined Shampoo in falling back onto her bed and smacking her head against the pillow but failed. "Okay, it's obvious that this panda thing means a lot more to you than it does to Master Nawa. What's going on?"

"It's my pops," Ranma groaned shaking her head. "Remember about my little... issue? Well, he fell into another one of those springs, and out popped the panda. Not that it really mattered much to his body type. Or his gluttony. Or his normal laziness," she added.

"If he's chased you here, then your father doesn't seem to be the lazy type," Mai drawled, sitting down on her own bed and kicking out her legs across the way so that they rested on top of Ranma's waist where he laid across Shampoo's bed. The redhead scowled at her and tried to push her legs off, but Mai just kept them there smirking a bit. "I've never fought a panda before. And if you're about to say something about this not being my problem or anything, I'm going to kick you."

"Why would I say anything like that? The more the merrier," Ranma smirked, and then grabbed her foot and began to tickle it mercilessly, causing Mai to shriek and kick out, rolling back off of her bed into the small, cleared area directly in front of the door.

Rolling her eyes at their antics, Shampoo dragged them back to the issue at hand, speculating aloud, "Shampoo wondering how they do it."

Ranma frowned at that, looking over at her, sitting back down on the bed and turning her body towards Shampoo as Mai also released her stance, and sat down primly at the foot of her own bed. "What do you mean? I mean, my father isn't the best hunter or anything, but he's got a panda's sense of smell, and is stubborn as all get out."

Shaking her head, Shampoo changed to Chinese in order to get her point across better. "Maybe, but how does your father know where we are **now**? We doubled back entirely, then swam through the ocean, a third off of Honshu's length before arriving here to throw off the trail. How did he find us?"

Mai held up a hand before Ranma could speak, then raised one finger to her lips, nibbling on her fingernail. "Shampoo has a point. If your father arrived on your heels here, it could be that he somehow followed your scent or maybe just was asking people if they had spotted you. But staying out to see for that length of time should've thrown even that off. And unless you told someone where you were going?"

She waited, watching as both of them shook their heads before going on. "Then how did he figure out you were here, specifically at this school? Maybe rumors about our fight against my grandfather could've helped them a little bit, but even then, how would your father then know you were still at the school?"

Ranma crossed her arms, staring up at the ceiling thoughtfully. "Actually, now that you pointed out like that... I have no idea."

The three of them bandied ideas and concepts around for a time, but Mai's idea of Ranma somehow having a GPS locator or something like that on him was shut down quickly. "How would my old man afford it? How would he know how to work it? And wouldn't it have lost power by this point?"

From there the speculation grew progressively more bizarre and eventually, the Chinese girl decided to cut through the speculations, wondering in Chinese if they were just thinking too much about it. "What I mean is, isn't there something about a Razor, er, the simplest answer is often the best or something like that? What if instead of just hearing rumors about our fights against your grandfather Mai, they ran into him when he escaped the casket, we put him in?"

Ranma and Mai both blinked, then Ranma nodded. "That makes too much sense. Although that makes it troublesome if we head to your training school after this Mai."

Mai grimaced at that, not liking the idea of saying goodbye to her two new friends so soon, but she nodded. "If your father follows us to my family's dojo we'll have Andy on our side, and even if they somehow made friends with Jubei and through him my grandfather, I could convince him to stay out of things too. Maybe even give you two sanctuary for a bit."

Shrugging, Ranma hopped to her feet and to the dresser they all shared, opening up the one drawer she used. The two real girls monopolized the rest of them, but Ranma was more than happy to let them do so after putting a small piece of paper in the handle of hers so he knew which one was which. The one-time Ranma had opened up the drawer the two ladies were using as their underwear drawer had given Ranma 'problems' for the rest of the day. "Thinking about it now isn't going to do anything, let's get a move on. And remember guys... er gals," she hastily corrected herself. "Remember that part of the reason why we were here in the first place is, because we wanted to figure out ways to capture the old man he couldn't get out of."

"Shampoo think that an excellent idea! Capture Fat Fool, hand him over to zoo!" Shampoo said enthusiastically. "That would only leave Weeping Man, right?"

"Yeah, and from how little he did when he and my Pops ambushed me the last time, he's not gonna be a problem." Ranma looked over at Mai. "Unless Jubei is with them too?"

"No way. One, he's too lazy for that kind of thing, too, while he's perverted, he wouldn't have helped them drag you back to this Nerima place. Even if they could convince him, it was the honorable thing to do, he'd simply see it as an internal affair of your martial arts school," Mai answered. *Not unless they had something perverted to offer him, and if that happens, Jubei is freaking dead to me and I might make it literal too!*

Not an hour later, the three of them were leaving the school, making plans. First, they would deal with the panda. Then, they would hunt down this food thief.

About an hour later, the trio were fully packed, their backpacks stuffed into their ki space and heading to the last place where the panda had been seen, talking about how to capture the elder – and lazier, and fatter – Saotome. "Panda or not, I want to deal with the ass in a way that'll tie him up for a long while."

"Shampoo just wish she knew more about pressure points. Remember her grandmother saying there a pressure point that make it impossible for someone to use hot water," Shampoo pouted, kicking the ground even as she walked beside Mai and Ranma, the trio taking their time at the moment.

"So it wouldn't be able to transform back into his human body! That's an amazing idea Shampoo, maybe when we get to Hong Kong can write your grandmother?" Ranma responded enthusiastically.

Mai frowned a bit at that reminder that after they left here, these two would only be spending a little bit of time with Mai and her family down in Kyushu before leaving Japan entirely. That idea bothered her a bit, which Mai put down to her jealousy about Ranma and Shampoo's romance, or the ambitious nature of their training journey. But she still nodded at Ranma suggestion.

To this Shampoo prevaricated, saying that she'd be willing to do that, but staying in Hong Kong long enough for mail to get back to her would be a major annoyance unless they found things to do there, saying in Chinese. "Sending mail to clan land and back is not easy. Mail is mostly carried on foot or by motorcycle out in the boonies. So, we could be stuck there for a month or more if we have to wait for mail to make the round-trip."

"And I don't even know really what to tell Grandmother." Shampoo sighed. "Remember Ranma, I'm supposed to be taking the male outside who beat me home, not go on a worldwide adventure with him."

Shaking her head at that, Ranma redirected the conversation to her father. "Let's set that aside for now. I think leading my Old Man into a trap is the best idea, and the two of you learned a lot about making traps and stuff, right? So leading Pops where we want him to go would be a good idea."

Mai pulled out a map from her cleavage window, flicking it open and the three of them paused there on the trail, looking it over for a moment. Eventually, it was decided to use a little area of sharp jagged rocks, small trees and bushes for the ambush site.

It was a little more open than the rest of the forest, which could mean that Genma and Soun wouldn't anticipate it having traps of any kind even if they had brushed the outer edge of the Musubime Osoroshi's defenses. It was also close to the area where the panda had been spotted most recently.

Mai however had a suggestion. "Instead of letting him chase you into that area Ranma, why don't we use this panda's greed and his general attitude against him?" Mai explained what she meant, and Ranma nodded, grinning in amusement. The plan would prick both Genma's greed in the sense of the food, and his habitual anger with Ranma about Ranma's female form.

Getting to the chosen area took them around twenty minutes, as they were moving silently and always on the watch for the panda, Genma in human form, or Soun. When they arrived in the area, Ranma patrolled around it, keeping an eye out, while Shampoo and Mai placed the traps.

When that was done, Ranma dressed himself up like one of the regular practitioners at Musubime Osoroshi, as did Mai. The two girls then fussed over the redhead's hair, causing her to blush hotly as they commented on how clean her hair was, and how silky it felt. "Honestly Ranma, it should be illegal for someone who doesn't care so much about their looks to have such nice hair."

"Shampoo agree! And she **know** Ranma not care much! Five minute cold shower should not be able to make your hair this nice," Shampoo grumbled, as the two girls worked Ranma's hair into a series of long curls, coming down her neck. It was easily the girliest style of hair Ranma could ever imagine, and this was helped by the judicious application of some eyeliner, and lipstick.

"And who exactly is to blame for me needing to take cold showers huh, who?" Ranma mumbled, her lips moving into a power before Shampoo smacked Ranma's chest. "Is this really necessary?"

"Enough of that. You agreed with the plan. And seeing you dressed up like this, especially with the makeup, is going to make your father see red, right?" Mai asked. She was a master of suing her looks in combat, and this was actually quite fun for her.

"If it doesn't give him an outright heart attack, he'll be furious," Ranma agreed with a sigh. "That doesn't mean I have to like it though."

"Look at the bright side. We could have played dress up even further, put you in some spandex or Lycra, as if you were one of those hoity-toity city girls out for a hike through the woods," Mai snickered.

The look that she got in turn told Mai that Ranma felt this thought was, in point of fact, not helpful. "You girls gotta remember, whatever I look like, I'm a guy inside. Guys don't wear makeup." *And you two have been rubbing my self-control raw this whole month, blast it!*

"Well, some guys do, but I get your point," Mai giggled, backing off a bit.

Now somewhat repentant, Shampoo hugged Ranma from behind, smooshing her breasts against the shorter redhead's back and neck, as her arms went around Ranma's chest just below her breasts. "Shampoo promise to make it up to you..." she whispered throatily into Ranma's ear, causing Ranma to blush hotly, and for Mai to chuckle shaking her head and imagining herself and Andy in such a position.

Soon enough, Mai too was ready, dolled up in similar attire to Ranma, although she had a bit more makeup on. The two of them then headed out, while Shampoo hid near the ambush point, her chui at the ready and eager gleam in her eyes. *No more running or evading, time to brain me a panda! Sweet revenge here I come!*

Soon, Mai and Ranma were near the area where the picnic goers had been ambushed by Genma in his panda-form, and Mai began, speaking a slightly loud voice to get Genma's attention if he was nearby. "I think someplace around here would be perfect Ranma. What do you think?"

Ranma followed along, looking around ostentatiously as she answered, and to Mai's surprise, when the redhead spoke, her normal 'boku' accent was gone. "It's a nice area, but I would prefer a place with a better view than just a bunch of trees. Wasn't there a stream somewhere nearby? Let's see if we can find that."

At first, it looked as if Ranma's father had moved on. They continued to move around, mentioning Ranma's name every time they stopped as they very obviously attempted to find a place to picnic that they would both agree on, but the panda did not make an appearance. It was only when they started to push out of the forest towards the more used areas of the park that the panda appeared, barreling out of the woods and growling.

Both young women shrieked, and backed away. "Kyaa! Bear!"

Spotting Ranma, the bear's eyes widened, and it instantly stood up on its back feet, a sign appearing without any preamble saying "I knew traveling with that Amazon hussy would be bad for you!" Flip "Look at you now! You are so girly it makes me gag!"

Mai was a far better actor than Ranma, and even as Ranma read that line and stewed about it, Mai had turned away so as to seemingly miss the fact that the panda had stood up on its hind feet and produced signs in order to communicate. She grabbed Ranma's arm, tugging hard. "Run!"

Ranma did so but stopped to give his father the stink guy, then smack her pert rear at him, before racing after Mai, catching up quickly. And she did not forget to grab up the bag of food, putting it on her back as she raced along. The panda chased after them, barreling through the woods as Mai and Ranma very deliberately kept just ahead of him, only occasionally taking to the trees, as if Mai couldn't quite keep up with Ranma there.

As they retreated, Soun appeared, trying to cut them out as he shouted, "Miss, we have no problem with you or your martial arts school! We're just retrieving our own wayward student! Please leave Ranma and stand aside"

Mai didn't seem to hear, acting the part of a panicking martial artist faced with, well, a wild animal that could tear her in two, shouting out "I don't know what you're talking about old man! What kind of psychopath sets a panda on two teenage girls!"

"Young lady, my friend won't harm you if..."

But Mai kept on running, noticeably slowing down over time only for Ranma to drag her along, acting the part of someone in over their head. This, coupled with Ranma's not replying to either of them spurred both older martial artists on in their chase.

While Soun thought that this act was a bit out of character for Genma's son, he thought that perhaps the boy was acting in this way for a reason. *Perhaps learning some martial arts technique that would normally only be taught to women? That would certainly be in keeping with how Ranma used his female form while in Nerima.*

In contrast, the site of Ranma dolled up like that had Genma seeing red, and he wasn't thinking at all at this point.

Eventually, they spotted the area where Shampoo and Mai had set up the traps. Mai took the lead, and the duo raced through it, not activating any of the traps. Then they were in the center of the area, and the panda and Soun raced out after them.

Genma charged into the rocky area on their heels only to instantly trip, a wire underneath his feet sending him forward his furry nose crashing to the ground. A pressure trap right in front of him opened up, the bear traps mapping cracking shut an inch away from his nose, causing him to freeze long enough for a spring trap to launch a boulder up and onto his back from nearby. The bear howled in pain, and then Ranma and Mai charged back.

Meanwhile Soun also found himself racing through several traps, chains, parts, and a small pitfall opening up in front of his boot, causing him to stumble forward. From every side bolas flashed out and Soun found himself hogtied in on the ground, with Shampoo pressing his head down, and thumping him hard in the back of the head with a chui.

With that one blow, Soun was out of it, and Shampoo shook her head, looking over to where the bear had forced its way back to its feet, pushing the boulder off his back, and was now using his signs as weapons against Mai and Ranma. "Shampoo think Ranma was overstating how weak this one is," the Chinese Amazon murmured, kicking Soun in the rear and sending him flying still hogtied to land in an open area nearby.

Then she moved to join the attack on the panda, launching a net in his direction. At the same time, Mai pulled back, and began to use her manriki.

With one foot caught by a chain trap attached to a nearby boulder and thus unable to take to the air, Genma couldn't get away. He still fought on though, using his signs to shout out about how dishonorable Ranma was, how he betrayed the art of Anything Goes and its future every day he was away from the arena.

But a blow from Mai's manriki crashed into the side of his head at the same time Ranma kicked him in the guts, followed by an uppercut. This was the last thing Genma saw and finally laid the bear out and Ranma gleefully let several large chains fall from her ki-space.

"All right! Let's hogtie this steer, and then head back to Master Nawa," Ranma shouted in triumph, and Shampoo cheered, while Mai just snickered, although she did help the two chain the panda up.

OOOOOOO

"...So, Master, what are we going to do with a panda?" Rei asked. The youngest and most physically imposing of Atama's direct apprentices stared incredulously at the large animal currently tied up in traditional Hotojutsu form, albeit with chains at the moment.

"I know someone at the Zoo in Tokyo. Maybe they'll be interested in bringing in a male to start up a breeding program," Atama shrugged. "I'm more concerned with the man who Mai said was somehow controlling the beast. We'll need to keep them separate, of course. And keep the beast unconscious. Rei?"

"Yep!" Rei said cheerfully, heading out to get some of the drugs they used to help desensitize their students to. A concoction of some of that stuff would keep the panda out, she

felt. And if it had the normal upside it did in large amounts, well, Master had said the panda might be used in a breeding program, anyway, right?

OOOOOO

With Genma and Soun taken care of, Shampoo, Ranma and Mai decided to put off until tomorrow the task of hunting down the food thief. For now, they opted to head into Sado the city and rent a few rooms for the night. Heading back into town and with no plans to return to the school, of course, meant that Ranma transformed back into a guy, which he celebrated with a loud whoop and hopping around like a demented bunny rabbit.

The sight should have been hilarious, given Ranma hadn't removed the makeup, although for some reason he had changed his hairstyle back to his pigtail. And indeed, Shampoo was laughing uproariously, shouting out between guffaws that Ranma needed to wipe his face before they got to the city.

For Mai however, the sight of the running makeup on Ranma's grinning countenance barely registered. She was too busy staring, trying hard not to verbalize once more that Shampoo was a very lucky girl. Mai had almost forgotten what Ranma looked like in male form over the past month and seeing him now after getting to know him seemed to heighten the impact. Ranma wasn't as broad in the shoulders or obviously muscled as Andy, but Mai knew for a fact that Ranma was actually far stronger. She had seen him lifting whole trees, hauling them around like they were fifty-pound weights, for goodness' sake.

He had absolutely no wasted flesh on him at all, every muscle was toned and shaped to perfection for the Art, not just weightlifting or to be seen. *And I'd wager that his hair is just as fluffy and nice to run your fingers through in this form as in his female body. I wonder what he looks like shirtless...* Mai thought, before shaking her head, asking. "So, where will you go from here do you think? Are you still going to take me up on my offer to come by Kyushu and my school?"

Ranma looked over at Shampoo, who nodded. "Yeah, I think what we did with my old man should hold him for a while. And I think that meeting this Andy guy could be interesting. Him and his brother, who, I'll note, you didn't mention until today."

"I don't actually know Terry all that well," Mai answered with a shrug. "Like I said, he's both older than Andy and me, he's a little over college age, and he's a wanderer to boot. Beyond that..." Her face closed off again as it always did when Andy's background came into the conversation. "It's not my place to say."

"Although we might not travel with you," Shampoo spoke up, causing Ranma to look at her in confusion, and Shampoo rolled her eyes, grabbing Ranma, who had taken the time to

transform into his male form once more, and shaking him several times before releasing him. "Ranma, it be nearly a month! Shampoo want some romance, darn it!"

Instead of blushing or being confused, as a part of Mai had thought he would, Ranma just nodded. "Actually, I had an idea in that direction. You said before that you wanted to buy us both some new bathing suits, right?" Ranma asked, swinging an arm around Shampoo's shoulders giving her brief hug before pulling away, not wanting to make Mai uncomfortable. "We could have a full day of it at the beach after we catch this food thief in our new suits, and then I could take you out to dinner in my male form."

"Shampoo think that sound too too good! Have romance time with female Ranma first in the waves and then later on the beach male Ranma."

"Eeh, part of me thinks that is going to be tempting fate too much, but we will see. Just realize if I do end up flashing any guys when I'm splashed with cold water and don't have a suit on, I'm going to blame you," Ranma quipped, causing Shampoo to giggle.

"You could just charge them for the show," Mai said, scowling very slightly for a moment before banishing the expression. The two of them were so cute together sometimes, that it made Mai jealous. Not just because she thought they were a nice couple, but because Ranma was actually putting forth some effort into the relationship. *When was the last time Andy did anything in terms of our friendship, let alone a relationship? I hope my new tricks will force Andy to start showing interest in me. If not, I really will be at the end of my rope.*

As that thought occurred, Mai began to laugh, and both of her companions looked at her in confusion. She explained it to them, and both Ranma and Shampoo laughed as well before Mai asked if she and Shampoo could head out shopping now. "Remember, you need more than just a bathing suit."

Ranma didn't have a problem with this and waved the two girls off. "You two have fun, I want to stay at in my male form for the rest of the day if that's all the same to you too. And, I'm still hungry."

Both women rolled her eyes at that but got up and headed off to do some shopping. Ranma paid for their food, and then began to wander around, eventually finding a small noodle yatai. *Huh, it almost reminds me of something, for some reason. Weird.*

Barely had Ranma ordered when shouts of 'stop, thief' reached his ears. *Damn, well my luck is working as normal, darn it.*

Poking his head out of the stall, Ranma saw a blur heading down the road away from him. Several other people who were standing around holding bowls or skewers in hand blinked in shock as the blur passed them faster than any of them can see. As it went the blur grabbed the food out of their hands, racing on before they could try and react.

Ranma blinked, then dodged back out of the reach of the blur, noting it was actually a young girl, around fourteen maybe, maybe a little younger? Dressed in a fuku with brown hair, wide eyes and a childish face she stared at Ranma as she passed by, and then bounced away out over the rooftops.

Eating his bowl quickly, Ranma tossed the bowl behind himself to the owner of the small yatai, giving chase quickly. *Well, this looks just as interesting as capturing my old man, who would've thought?*

The blur tried to escape, but Ranma caught up quickly, and as he did, his hand flicked out. From his sleeve the rope dart Ranma had taken from Musubime Osoroshi shot out, aiming at the girls' feet. The dart wound around her leg, the rope pulling taught quickly as Ranma tugged on it.

To his surprise, the girl moved with the attack, lashing out back at Ranma with several kicks from both legs, but Ranma blocked them, and with a few twists of his tied the rope around her free leg, pulling it taut. Ranma then twirled, flipping the youngster around to crash back-first into the top of the rooftop they were fighting on. "Now, I wonder what your story is kiddo? You stealing food for fun, training, or..."

He broke off as the girl's stomach grumbled, and Ranma sighed. "Or just because you're hungry."

Staring at the girls face as she looked up at him in shock, one hand rubbing at her sore back, Ranma knelt beside her, and untied the rope around her legs. He had been hungry far too often when on the road with Genma to be able to look at that face and turn away. "Come on kid, let's get you some food. And what's your name anyway?"

"K, Kurumi," the woman said, shaking her head as she let Ranma help her to her feet. "Wow Onii-san! No one's ever been able to stop me from taking their food before! And what was with that rope trick thing?"

The two of them talked for a while as Ranma led the girl away from her recent victims and found another place to grab some food at. The girl was a bottomless pit even by Ranma's standards, eating a whole bowl full of katsudon in the time Ranma took to take out half a dozen bites. *I never thought I would ever run into someone who had a stomach to match the hereditary Saotome bottomless pit!*

Kurumi could also talk a mile a minute. "Andsowebeenlookingaroundandtravelingandit'sreallyfunbutsometimesyouknowwedon'tfinda nyjobsthatwecandotowork, andfoodgetsalittlescarcesolgoalittlecrazyandooohIhopemynee-samadoesn'tgetangryatmeagain,we'retryingtofindourfatheryouseeandeverytimewetrytofinda uetowhereheis,itgoesnowhere,butshewasreallyhopefulaboutthisone,andonee-samawillbereallyangryifwehavetoleavebecauseIgotpeopleangryatme."

"Breathe kid," Ranma quipped, ruffling her hair. Shampoo seemed to like that, so he figured it would work on Kurumi, and it did seem to, the younger girl pausing to take a breath, and then leaning into his hand, a bright smile on her face. "The food's not going anywhere, and you're talking too fast for me to understand more than a few words at a time."

"Kurumi!" a voice shouted, and Ranma turned around, blinking his eyes and staring for a second.

Ranma had thought that Kasumi would forever remain the girl who was closest to the whole Yamato Nadeshiko ideal. But if Kasumi embodied the personality and housewifely abilities encompassed by that concept, the girl walking towards Ranma embodied the physical characteristics.

She was not as tall as Ranma was, but taller than her younger sister, had dark black hair done up in a ponytail, and was moving at a sedate, controlled pace while wearing a schoolgirl's uniform that on her looked way better than it did on her younger sister. Her chest was far more modest than Shampoo or Mai, although it could be equal to Nabiki. Her legs were long and well-built underneath her skirt, which went down to just below her knee, completing the image of a demure young maiden. *Good grief, now I understand why silver uniforms like that are sometimes thought of as a fetish thing.*

"Nee-sama! This is Ranma, he offered to buy me food when he caught me stealing food before!" Kurumi said happily, zero shame in her voice. "He's a really good martial artist, and he did this rope trick that caught my legs. Then he was also nice and offered me food."

Pausing, the older girl took Ranma in for a moment, then bowed from the waist, saying profusely, "Thank you very much! I wish I could always find jobs which would allow us to work for our way, but sometimes my imouto's hunger gets the better of her."

"Not a problem, I know how it is on the road sometimes. To my mind, if you're hungry, then feeding your stomach comes first," Ranma answered. "And your little sister said you two practice some kind of martial arts, and were looking for your old man. Can I get the full story there? I mean I can understand being on a training journey, but how did you two get separated from him in the first place?"

"Ah, I am sorry for my imouto's poor manners. As for our circumstances, we are not so much on a training journey as you would understand it, but simply searching for our father. We have been since we were very young." The girl then blinked, before smiling politely at Ranma. "But I'm afraid I am guilty of being rude. I am Natsume Tendo of the Tendo school of indiscriminate grappling. May I know your full name, Ranma?"

End Chapter

Chapter 4: Misconceptions Abound

Ranma blinked, then blinked again. "I'm sorry, could you say that again? I could've sworn you said Anything Goes..."

"I did. The two of us are traveling students of the Anything Goes Tendo style of martial arts," Natsume answered. She then furrowed her brow for a moment before her eyes went wide. "Wait, does that mean you've heard of it before? We've only very rarely spoken to anyone who's heard of Anything Goes, let alone the Tendo style."

"Well, you might say I've heard of it. My name is Ranma Saotome, of the Saotome Anything Goes Aerial Style," Ranma introduced himself, shaking his head then smiling. "Damn, I didn't actually think the Tendo school had any students beyond Akane. And you're traveling around too? That's great. Personally, I think you learn a lot more on the road than you do stuck in a dojo. When did you train there?"

"Who is Akane and how you know about the Tendo school?!" Natsume nearly demanded, her hands twitching at her side as if she wanted to reach forward and shake answers out of Ranma, ignoring his question. "Do you know where it is, or where the Master of the style is at least? We have been searching for our father since we were very young!"

At that, Ranma's interest in meeting two fellow students of Anything Goes vanished, as he stared at them in shock. "I'm sorry, but yer father? Soun is your Pops!?" *Weeping Man had two other daughters around the place!? Wait... he never mentioned them, and neither did any of the others.* While Ranma had issues with all three Tendo girls, he bet at least two out of three would have mentioned having other sisters around the place. *And Natsume looks my age maybe, while Kurumi's for sure younger than Akane.*

"Yes. For reasons I cannot remember, our father trained us in martial arts for a time, but then he had to leave for some reason. But he left a manual of martial arts training for with us, as well as a written promise that if we kept on training, we would become heirs to the Tendo dojo," Natsume answered firmly.

At that point, Ranma began to get severe Ryoga vibes from this moment. *What is it about martial artists that we start to obsess about things? What the heck is going on here?*

"Hold on," he held up his hands deciding he needed other people's impression on this. *And if Shampoo sees me talking to two girls, she might go all Akane on me if I don't let her in on what's going on right off the bat.* "I imagine you don't want to have to tell your story twice in a row, so hold off on it for now. Let's go introduce you to some of my friends, kouhai."

OOOOOO

Back in Nerima, Akane sneezed several times in a row, missing her chop down at the block in front of her and nearly hurting her hand. "Huh, someone must be talking about me. I hope it isn't that baka Ranma!"

OOOOOO

As Ranma used the formal term for a younger student Kurumi giggled, while Natsume smiled jabbing back in a joking manner, "Are you sure that I am **your** kouhai instead of vice-versa? If we are judging by just our ages, I might be a little older than you."

"Ha! In Anything Goes, there's only one real way to prove seniority, and that's in a fight. But we can put that off for now." Looking around, Ranma got his bearings for a moment, then gestured the other two girls to follow him. "Come on." He hesitated for a moment, then decided to say it, hoping to cut off any future issues quickly. "I'm traveling with my girlfriend and a friend of ours, they'll be interested in your story too. Especially considering our interactions with Soun up to this point."

"...That last sounds rather ominous," Natsume mused, her eyes narrowing and one hand reaching for the tennis racket case she had over one shoulder. "Is there any reason for it? And might I ask why you are not giving a Martial Arts Master his proper due? Or should I just assume you lack proper manners?"

Ranma just laughed. "Heh, yeah, I ain't big on titles. Or if ya were taught Anything Goes Taunting and that was supposed to annoy me, I would have ta say you fail. As for my specific interactions with Soun... let's wait a bit on that."

Not sensing the tension between her older sister and Ranma, Kurumi interjected excitedly. "So you are a practitioner of Anything Goes too, huh. And the Aerial Style? That makes sense given how quick you were able to catch up with me. What kind of skills does that school think is most important? I'd bet balance and speed, I'm right, aren't I? Aren't I? The way we've trained ourselves, Onee-san and I specialize in using unusual weapons, and temperature-based ki."

"Huh, temperature-based? That's kind of interesting, although I'd wager it's slow ta build up. But does that mean you don't know any of the pure life energy tricks like a ki space?" Ranma asked, reaching into his sleeve and pulling out some of the rope of the rope dart that he had used earlier against Kurumi.

"No, but I would be seriously willing to learn! Can you imagine how much food I'd be able to stuff in my pockets if I could expand them like that?" Kurumi asked enthusiastically.

Ranma smiled at that, ruffling her hair. The younger girl's concentration on filling her stomach was like looking into a magic mirror set on the past. There had been many a time traveling with his father when he had been hungry and had resorted to stealing food. He would

probably have killed for the ability to use ki space at that point. “Well, as your Senpai, I suppose it behooves me to teach you a few tricks.” He stated in a mock-posh manner, ruining the impression by winking at Natsume.

She made a loud harrumph noise at that, but Natsume’s lips were twitching as she did, her earlier flair of concern and suspicion disappearing as she watched Ranma interact with her younger sister. A moment later she decided to join the conversation as Kurumi stopped to breathe. “So Ranma, tell me about yourself. How long has your training journey been? And what is your goal? Is there a Saotome dojo?”

“...Er, no there isn’t. And that kind of touches on what we’ll talk about after we all exchange stories later. As for my training journey, that we can talk about now. I’ve been on the road since I could walk. As far as I know, my Old Man’s my only family, and we traveled all over the place. Right now, I have sort of gone beyond the Aerial Style of Anything Goes, and I am actively incorporating other styles while trying to create my own.” Ranma gestured, and the rope dart again made an appearance. “There is a martial arts school here on this island that specializes in Hotojutsu. Me, Shampoo and Mai spent a month their learning from them, teaching them some things and learning others. At the moment, my chief goal is to come up with my own versions of ki attacks and incorporate them into my growing style.”

With that, he grinned, and tapped Natsume on the shoulder, who had begun smiling faintly at the fact Ranma had yet to create his own ki attacks, something she and Kurumi had done already. After tapping her shoulder, Ranma hurled his rope dart up towards a distant rooftop. Both girls gasped as the rope continued to come out of his ki space, until it was far longer than he was tall, and wrapped around a flagpole on the top of the twelve-story building above them. “Tag, you’re it.”

With that, he was off, flinging himself upward.

Behind Ranma, Natsume and Kurumi exchanged a glance, surprise on both of their faces. But there was only one response to that kind of thing from a practitioner of Anything Goes, and Kurumi hopped out of Natsume’s reach. “Sorry Nee-san!” With a giggle she raced away, following Ranma up and into the rooftops, while Natsume snorted and did the same, a small smile on her face he despite her best efforts to seem put upon.

OOOOOO

Shampoo hummed happily, as she placed the last bag of clothing she had bought into her ki space, gleefully looking forward to trying on the various outfits for Ranma. After the last month of little to no flirting, she was eager to push things forward a bit. *Or better yet, make Ranma go crazy enough to push forward himself. That would be the most fun, I think.*

Beside her, Mai was also happy. Finding bras that actually fit her were kind of rare, but she had found a store that specialized in American clothing. Or at least, Mai reflected what they

thought was American clothing. *American girls really aren't that stacked normally. Still, delusions of horny aside, at least they had bras in my size.*

"Shampoo... That is... I think that if Andy doesn't like you in that little red number you bought, he doesn't have a pulse," Shampoo giggled, elbowing the girl as Mai followed her example, putting her last purchase in her ki space. The fact this was still her 'boob window' and Mai somehow stuck the small bag into that 'area' made Shampoo's point for her. *Grr... why can't I remember to speak in first person instead of third? After all this time it isn't that hard. Even if I am still fumbling for specific words sometimes.*

"We'll see. I still think that tying him down and demanding some fun could be the only way I'm going to get anywhere with him," Mai answered, snickering for a moment, shaking her head, her words going down a familiar lane for a second. "I don't know what it is, he was sweet on me, he was responding, and then he just stopped. Every time I tried to ask him what was wrong, he just brushes it off, saying there was nothing wrong. And then, every time I started to flirt with him, tried to push things forward, he'd blush, stammer and run away." At that point Mai allowed a wry smirk to appear on her face. "Although you're right, I think the red number, combined with him being tied up, will force the issue nicely..."

She trailed off, wagging her eyebrows dramatically at Shampoo, who giggled again, and the two of them walked on arm in arm, debating what they thought of as good data ideas as they headed towards the meeting place they had set up with Ranma near their hotel. As they went, the two gorgeous girls drew looks from a lot of the men around them, but both ignored it.

When they arrived at the meeting place, Shampoo's eyes narrowed dangerously, her laughter cutting off with the abruptness of a guillotine as she spied Ranma there, smiling and talking to two girls. Both were quite cute, one a Yamato Nadeshiko type. "What in world!?" she growled, her accent back once more.

Mai also blinked at the sight, before she teased, "Huh, you know, I never took him for a womanizer. Especially after the last month."

Unfortunately, Shampoo wasn't listening, or the mention of the last month, when Ranma had done all in his power to not be alone or get close to any of the other girls at Musubime Osoroshi. She had stomped forward, her maces appearing in her hands. People noticing her charging forward began to scatter, causing Ranma and the two girls he was talking to turn to her. "Ranma! Who these girls!?"

Ranma's eyes widened, not having seen Shampoo come all over possessive like this before. The fact that she didn't trust him stung a bit, but at least she was not swinging for his head just yet like Akane had more than once. "Wait a second! Let me explain!"

The Amazon was about to raise her chui, but the rope weapon Mai had been given by Master Nawa snagged her around her upper arms, pinning them to their side. At the same time, Shampoo noted absently that both of the girls had shifted away from Ranma to either side and taken up combat stances. That at least showed they were martial artists of some kind anyway and the stances looked familiar.

“Geez girl, I was joking,” Mai soothed, coming up behind the Amazon, placing a hand on her shoulder. “Calm down.”

Shampoo growled, but placed her maces back in her ki space, and Mai in turn released her from the rope across her upper chest. “Ranma talk quick. Amazons be very possessive.”

That caused Ranma’s eyes to narrow a bit, but he shrugged it off, for now, and gestured to either side of the girls with them, introducing them. At that point, Shampoo began frowning for an entirely different reason. Of the three of them, only Ranma really understood how strange this sounded given Soun’s general character, but Shampoo at least knew that Soun had three daughters already. Still, the drop of the Tendo name cooled Shampoo off for now and they all adjourned to a nearby park, where they sat out on the grass.

“Okay, now that we’re all calmed down, why don’t the two of you explain yourselves a bit more, and then I’ll explain how I know your Old Man, and that we ain’t friends or whatever.” *If it turns out he really is their father anyway. Seriously, it really doesn’t sound like the guy.*

Natsume felt as if there was something she and Kurumi weren’t aware of going on here, but she obliged him nonetheless, while Kurumi looked between Shampoo and Mai in interest. She was very interested in their stories too, given how few female martial artists they had met before this.

Called out to give a greater explanation, Natsume pulled out the sisters’ treasures, the message which told them about their destiny, as well as the manual for the Tendo Style. She held the message out to Ranma, who took it, reading it quickly, as Natsume and Kurumi continued to speak about their lives up to this point. They had been very young when their father had begun training them out in the woods, which was somewhat normal. Natsume remembered being looked after by a woman before that, while Kurumi mainly remembered the training and being taught how to cook sweet potatoes over an open fire. From there though, the story turned bad, and, to the three listeners, somewhat unbelievable.

When they finished, Mai frowned. “And the only mementoes you have of your father is this book and the letter promising you could become the heiress of the Tendo Sytle? I’m sorry Natsume, but if it was me who had been left behind by my father, it wouldn’t matter to me what kind of martial arts training he left me with or anything else. I would not be willing to just forget about being left behind. I’d leave it all behind and try and move on.”

“He had to have a reason! I remember he was crying when he left us, crying about some woman or other, and rushing off like a life was in danger. That was the only memory I have. I can’t even remember what he looked like, but I remember tears, and I remember that he was crying a woman’s name,” Natsume answered firmly. “And he **did** leave us the training manual.”

“Besides, it wasn’t his fault he couldn’t find us again,” Kurumi added “We stayed in the woods there for a while, but then the local police found us. They sent us to an orphanage, but they tried to set us up for adoption, each of us on our own!

“Exactly. I refused to let them separate Kurumi and I, and after the third time they tried, we ran away,” Natsume took over once more. “Since then we have had to keep moving. Without paperwork of any kind we would be forced back into the orphanage system. And the three times we were caught by local police, they insisted on trying to separate us. So we just escaped each time and moved on, always further from the place we initially trained.”

“Heeheh, although thanks to our training, each time we had to escape was easier than the last time,” Kurumi snickered.

“Oh, I see. That makes it a bit more believable but even so...” Mai grimaced.

“Ranma?” Shampoo looked over at the pigtailed martial artist. He had passed on the message to her and Mai early on in the tale, more eager to look at the training manual than the message considering he wouldn’t even be able to tell them if it had been Soun’s handwriting or not.

Now he looked up with a nod at Shampoo’s unasked question. “Some of it is in code, which kind of reminds me of what my Old Man did for some of the training manuals we used early on. But it definitely covers a lot of territory. Stances, strikes, daily exercises. It’s a great primer, and it’s got a few things in here, I think anyway, those are the parts that are in code, that my Old Man didn’t teach me. I’d wager that’s where you two got the idea for those temperature based ki attacks ya mentioned, right?”

At the mention of ki both Mai and Shampoo looked interested, while Natsume smiled proudly. “Indeed. We were able to reverse engineer some of the coded messages in the training manual, and came up with several different attacks, some that require both of us working in tandem, others that don’t.”

“More importantly Ranma, do you recognize them from your time in the Tendo dojo?” Mai interjected.

“Oh yeah,” Ranma answered blithely, the book having gone a long way to convince him there might be something to Natsume and Kurumi’s story. “Akane only practiced one or two of the stances and mixed in a lot more judo and really raw karate but some of the stuff in this

manual definitely matches what little she used. More importantly, a lot of it matches what Soun has used when he's fought me."

At that, Natsume's eyes then narrowed again, and she waved a finger in Ranma's face. "Since my and Kurumi's identities have now been proven, it is time for you to do some of the talking," she declared firmly. "I acknowledge that you are also a practitioner of Anything Goes if you can recognize our booklet for what it is and defeat Kurumi in her food run. But tell us about our father, tell us how you know him and where we can find him, please!"

"Well, I could tell you where the Tendo place is, but you wouldn't find him there. As for how I know him..." Ranma thought for a second, and instantly made the decision to not mention the whole marriage agreement thing. There was no need, it would just muddy the waters, and judging from Shampoo's earlier moment of jealousy, would probably not be a good idea at all. "My Pops and I had recently run into a mishap in China. That's where we met Shampoo, actually. Anyway, after that disaster, Pops, decided we should take a break from the roads for a bit, to research whether or not that problem could be cured."

"What problem?" Kurumi asked eagerly, munching on some popcorn she'd just swiped from a nearby vender.

Ranma winced, and Mai patted his shoulder. "I know after the past month you want to stay male for as long as possible, but with your curse, seeing really is believing Ranma." She held out a water bottle in her other hand, making a tipping motion towards Ranma.

He sighed, but agreed took it, and dumped the contents over himself. Ranma then began to wring out her hair as Natsume and Kurumi both froze in utter shock. Kurumi was frozen mid-chew, her hand halfway to her mouth, while Natsume had slid out of the park chair she had been sitting in, her head thunking hard against the seat as she did. Not that she seemed to notice, too busy staring at Ranma. "Abu, aba, ah, wha..."

"You two explain, I'm going to get some more hot water," Ranma muttered, shaking her head and ignoring the shocked looks from some of the other people walking about the small park. By the time Ranma returned, once more in his male form, Shampoo had explained about the curse, and had taken the time to explain about how she and Ranma had met, and then got involved with one another.

As he rejoined them, she was explaining about how the curses could only rarely be cured. "There is no known cure-all, and far too often, different springs tend to mix. If you, say, try to use the Spring of Drowned Boy to offset the Spring of Drowned Girl, there's no knowing if you will be cured or if they will mix. It seems entirely random."

And I am so not mentioning Elder Rin Se's mad idea that the springs are alive somehow. There's just no way that's right, and even if it is, I really don't want to mention it. I still

remember the looks the other elders gave her when she brought up that idea, Shampoo reflected.

“I, I see...” Natsume murmured, while Kurumi hopped to her feet and began to move around Ranma, poking him here and there as she muttered questions about where the height went and why she had boobies when Kurumi didn’t.

“Do you want my tits? I’ll cheerfully give them to you. Remember, I spent seventeen years as a guy. Having these things stuck to me is just a distraction. A very different and far less welcome distraction than Shampoo’s version,” he teased, winking at the Amazon girl, who giggled a bit at the rather nice, if tongue-in-cheek, compliment.

“Anyway, where was I? Oh yeah, so my Old Man and I drop in on Soun. We stay there for half a year or so, and I’m not exactly getting along with any of his daughters. Er, the three that were living there anyway.” Natsume winced at that, as did Mai and Shampoo, although their reasoning was that Ranma could have been a little gentler at how he put that.

“Wait, what?” Kurumi asked, slumping a little.

Mai put in arm around the younger girls’ shoulder, squeezing gently and glaring at Ranma.

Ranma though thought it would be better to tear off the duct tape all in one go, so simply explained bluntly that Soun was already living with three daughters.

Natsume crossed her arms under her chest, glaring at him. She honestly didn’t particularly care so much about having more sisters to get to know. Over the past five years or so she had begun to realize that there must be some reason why their father had never even searched for them, and their having sisters elsewhere was certainly a reason. No, Natsume was far more concerned about what she felt was their birthright. “Do you mean to tell me that this Akane the girl calls herself the heir to the Tendo dojo? But by your earlier words, she doesn’t use any advanced techniques.”

“To be fair, I don’t know if the Tendo school **has** any advanced techniques unless you two’ve created some and there are more in that book,” Ranma said with a shrug. “But yeah, Akane was named the heir. Mind you, the dojo didn’t have any students beyond Akane, and I never saw her taking instruction from Soun.”

All three of those points were extremely disturbing to both sisters. They had built up this idea that the Tendo dojo would be a magnificent place, full of other students over which their father resided like a stern task master. That they would have to beat several other students all in order to take their rightful place as heirs, while their father proudly looked on, shedding tears of joy at his daughters finding him after so long training on the road.

It turned out that the only part of that they had right was the fact he would probably be crying. Ranma had not spared any description of Soun during his time in the Tendo household, and that included how he would cry at the drop of a hat and didn't really seem to be in control of the household at all.

"You haven't explained why you left the dojo to travel again," Natsume pointed out after a few minutes of contemplation. Personally, she wasn't certain if she believed it, and the fact that Shampoo had admitted that she hadn't been at the dojo long enough to observe much of anything but Akane's lack of skill meant that perhaps Ranma was exaggerating things.

Ranma paused, tugging at his pigtail, but he had time to think up a reason that didn't touch on the marriage agreement BS. "Well, like I said, Soun and the Tendo school didn't seem to have much to offer. And in those six months I had kinda stopped growing. I'm only seventeen, I don't want to settle down. And frankly, my Old Man was becoming way too... What's the fancy word for when someone becomes really lazy and doesn't want to move?"

"Sedentary," Mai supplied.

"Yeah that. I mean he trained me in the mornings, and then he sent me off the school, which I thought was a waste of time, and then just either lazed about the place or worked part time as a mascot."

"Mascot?" Kurumi giggled. "What?"

"Er, yeah, well I fell into Spring of Drowned Girl, right? My Old Man fell into the Spring of Drowned Panda. Didn't change his height or weight much, but hey, at least it gave him better eyesight. And an extra layer of fat. Makes him harder to fight in that form," Ranma explained, causing Kurumi to laugh, not really believing him until Mai and Shampoo stated that Genma did indeed transform into a panda when doused in cold water. Shampoo had seen it, while Mai had fought him in his panda form.

"Anyway, so I was getting kind of bored, kind of irritated, and the home life was crap, for reasons I ain't gonna go into right now. Mind you there were a lot of weird martial arts styles around the place, and this one rival guy I have who occasionally randomly found his way there. Don't ask. But for the most part, most of those styles were just really extreme refinements for specific types of combat or tricks. Martial arts skating, a few decent wind-cutting attacks I learned in a day, martial arts take-out, martial arts rhythmic gymnastics..."

"Oh, that one! We've run into that one too, right?" Kurumi asked looking over at Natsume. "That was the one with that foreign girl, the Russian who had come here to be trained or something?"

Natsume blushed at that, nodding her head. "Yes, she and I had a bit of a rivalry going for a few weeks, um something like a year or so ago, I think. I can understand why you believe

that style is a simply an extreme refinement of basic techniques, though I would say that the ribbon techniques are extremely useful.”

“They are, but that’s nothing to compare with what the three of us learned from Master Nawa here on Sado. But anyway, you take a trick here, you take a trick there, fine. But eventually, you need to be able to build up your basic ‘stats’ you know? Strength, speed, agility. Since leaving, Shampoo and I have both sparred with Yokozuna Honda, and doing so proved that we both needed to up our ability to take hits, something we’d already determined, and strength, and it tells us how far we have to go. I would never have found an opponent like him if I had stayed at the Tendo place.”

Staring at Ranma, Natsume slowly shook her head. “So, you left because you were no longer getting stronger? I am not certain I would have made the same decision. Part of me says I would regardless of my goal to become the heiress to the Tendo School, while the other part is appalled at the very idea.”

Kurumi on the other hand **knew** she wouldn’t have made that decision. Kurumi dreamed of settling down in one place, having a real roof over her head, going to school, making friends, and no longer traveling! Kurumi loved Natsume a lot, but while Natsume had always concentrated on her dream of being the heiress to the Tendo Dojo, Kurumi had always just wanted to make their father proud, move in with him and have a family. *And now, I, I don’t really know what to think any more*, she thought, scowling as she munched on the last of her popcorn.

“And why is our father trying to help yours drag you back?” Natsume demanded. “Even if I believed everything else, that seems unusual to me. You are a free human being, and so long as you are not teaching or using your skills to perform criminal acts, I daresay your Master should not be going to such efforts to drag you back. Especially when you can show marked progress. As you have by defeating him in these fights of yours.”

“I’ve got a theory there actually. I think my Old Man and yours kind of split the work, you know?” When Natsume looked at him in confusion Ranma hurried on. “I mean, your Old Man settled down, built up a local reputation built the dojo, and everything else. Meanwhile, my Pops kept on traveling, getting stronger, teaching me to do the same. Put them together, and you’ve got a school that is worth the name you know? I’d wager anything the plan was my Pop’s. This way he gets to bring me in as the shiny new heir, set me up to take over the dojo, without him needing to do anything but train me, something he was actually pretty good at, unlike a lot of other things.”

“Like being honest, caring about laws, putting food on our plates instead of his alone, and being generally honorable?” Mai snorted. Ranma had shared a lot of the stuff he and his father had done while on the road with her. Not everything, but enough.

“Exactly. Genma’s a waste of space, but he’s a great martial arts trainer.” Was Ranma bitter about some of the things Old Man done over the years? Yes. Very much so. But even when Ranma was in a major panda-bashing mood, a certain furry demon technique came to mind, he had to give his father kudos for training Ranma himself to the degree he had.

“... So, you are saying that in a way **you** could be called the heir to the Tendo dojo instead of Akane?” Natsume inquired, her tone almost sweet, but her eyes dangerous. She and Kurumi had been on the road for so long, moving from place to place, learning, growing and pushing themselves for so long! The idea a boy would just come around and claim what was theirs, even if they had never actually seen it, struck her to the quick. As did the earlier comments about the Tendo school not having any special techniques. *I’ll show him special techniques!*

Hearing that tone and seeing the look in her eyes, anyone else would have faltered. But Ranma breathed a sigh of relief. *Thank goodness, the talking seems to be done with.* Trying to explain Ranma’s antipathy to the Tendos and the dojo without commenting on his and Akane’s ‘relationship’ was like telling a story without explaining the plot. Really darn hard in other words. Even his explanation for why Soun had come after Ranma with his Old Man didn’t quite make sense without mentioning the marriage contract between the two families.

“Eh, I would call myself the heir to the Aerial Style at least,” he said aloud smirking challengingly back at Natsume. “And we still have to decide which of us is the senior student right?”

At Ranma’s ready understanding, some of the tension Natsume faded away, and she nodded, a bright smile appearing on her face. “We do indeed. I am still... Unhappy to understand that our father has invested so much effort in trying to hunt you down, when he apparently did not think either myself or my sister worthy of that kind of effort. And there is a simple way at least to decide which of us is the most senior. I do not suppose you would know of a proper place around here or such a... Discussion?”

“Oh, I like her,” Mai murmured easily understanding that this was going to end up in a fight sooner or later. “You have the iron gauntlet in the velvet glove tone down pat, Natsume. I really like that.”

“Shampoo... Drat it, I will get that right if it kills me! I will reserve judgment until I see if she can back it up,” Shampoo said with a grin also understanding where this was going. *If we were back in China and we’d run into these two, I could possibly even send them to the village. The elders are always happy to bring in new girls, and if these two really have some temperature-based energy techniques, they will be very welcome indeed. As it is, this could be fun. Although there is one question that still bugging me.* “We do know of a place, right?”

“Yeah, that movie theater roof where we dealt with the pervert following Mai should work,” Ranma nodded. “I’d only request that we keep the damage to a minimum. I can

probably fix a lot of things, but I really don't want to have to deal with the authorities if we bring attention to ourselves."

"You can repair things?" Kurumi asked.

Ranma noticed that none of the others with them made any effort to go and pay the man back for his popcorn and snickered internally even as he answered Kurumi's question. "Yeah, one time, Shampoo and I stayed with this Martial Arts Construction school. She went off to learn acupuncture and herbalism from a local doctor, and I stayed with them to learn some of their techniques."

"Neat!" Kurumi murmured, as Mai and Shampoo led the way off.

Perhaps it was because he had spent too much time in his female form lately, or perhaps it was just because he and Shampoo hadn't had any romance time the past month for various reasons. But as they walked through the streets, Ranma's eyes continually strayed down to the view in front of him, staring at Shampoo's hips and rear, and Mai's too, although he tried not to. Despite the fact both of them were dressed in normal street going fashion, it was very clear they had bodies to kill for. Natsume was also in that category, complete with adding a bit more of a fetish given the school uniform she was still wearing.

What is up with that anyway? I've never understood the idea of wearing uniforms at all, let alone when you're not in school. Or... huh, I guess it could be camouflage. Even Kurumi was getting some looks as evening began to fall, although Ranma felt that was just wrong. She's a freaking kid who looks more childish than even her age should tell ya, you bastards!

Soon, they were at the movie theater, where Natsume had to break off for a moment as Kurumi zoomed over about to enter the movie theater and undoubtedly ransack the place for food. This left Ranma and his two original companions alone, and Shampoo instantly turned to him. "Shampoo have question," she stated, no longer trying to get her Japanese in her haste to get her words out.

"If it's about keeping the whole engagement thing a secret, I would've thought that was obvious. It would really complicate matters, especially since Natsume seems to be the kind of honorable sort who would take it upon herself to see the agreement through," Ranma answered hastily. He was still a little annoyed at how Shampoo had looked ready to leap to a conclusion earlier but felt that was a conversation for another time. *After I get some of my aggression out on a girl who ain't my girlfriend... damn, but that sounds bad even in my own head.*

"Not that. Shampoo understood that. What is Ranma's intention with these girls going forward?" Shampoo, snickered a little at how Ranma looked a little scared and got that out so quickly. *Good, he should understand that Amazons can be very possessive. Some sisters might*

be willing to share, but it isn't right for any male to assume that is the case, like that bastard Jamal that Lin Tel brought home last year.

"She has a point Ranma. Why not just send them off to Nerima and be done with it if you really think Weepy Man is their father and left them for whatever reason. Let him and the Tendos handle it.

"I understand what you're saying, and honestly, I would if I figured that they would be welcome there. But I can't say that with a straight face. Besides, maybe if they have some techniques, we could bring them along to your school, Mai? And maybe on our way there, we'll get attacked by Soun again. At that point, they'll become his problem... although that kind of sounds bad too, damn it." He scowled. "I just want to help them, as it's obvious they've had a harder time on the road than I ever did. Why is it that our parent's problems keep on falling on us?"

"You really think that there's some connection between them, then?" Mai shook her head, as Natsume appeared from the entrance to the movie theater dragging her little sister, who was slurping down a Twizzler that she undoubtedly had not paid for. "It isn't some mistake?"

"Eh, it's certain they are trained in Anything Goes. That's about all I can say at this point for certain," Ranma answered not wanting to say more with the sisters coming closer.

Regardless, the important thing is that their fellow students of Anything Goes, so I'm obliged to look out for them. And I can tell that life on the road is wearing on Kurumi at the very least. Natsume seems to be handling it better, but even there I bet I have a lot of tricks I could show them how to make it better. Things I learned from my Old Man and the kind of stuff we've been doin', Shampoo," he said winking at the girl.

That wink reminded Shampoo of the most important thing at the moment, the fact that she needed some romance! She was about to mention that in no uncertain terms, when Natsume and a pouting Kurumi reached them. "Sorry that took so long. Thank you Mai for the loan of your money. I promise I'll pay you back."

"No need. Just put on a good show for Shampoo and me and I'll call it even," Mai answered with a slight wince. *Oh dear, I can see Ranma's point now. That kind of rigid thinking on the term 'honor' doesn't really go well with the needs of living on the road.*

Natsume smiled and replied that she certainly would, then looked over to Ranma, who just gestured above them towards the rooftop. He then led the way, bouncing up onto a streetlight and then from there onto the roof of the movie theater, where he moved to the opposite side. Shampoo, Mai and Kurumi sat along one of the sides of the roof, with Mai stepping forward. She had the most experience officiating matches, which was something Shampoo had never done before.

Meanwhile, after a brief discussion with Kurumi during which the younger girl gave her sister her weapon, which Natsume placed on her wrist. With that done, Natsume moved to stand across from Ranma. Ranma had seen the ribbon in action and made a note of it but had not been prepared for the tennis racket bag on Natsume's back to hold a carpet beater. The way she held, it meant the thing was a weapon despite its commonplace nature. *Meh, I've seen weirder.*

The two of them bowed to one another as Mai began to speak. "This is a match for the title of most senior student of the combined Anything Goes schools. Blows that are deliberately meant to cripple or kill are forbidden. Beyond that, keep to the area of this rooftop, and try not to damage the roof too badly, as Ranma said earlier. I will officiate if that meets with everyone's approval?"

Kurumi's eyes widened at the formality, her hand pausing half-way to stuffing a KitKat into her mouth. "Er..."

Yet Natsume simply nodded, indicating both that she understood, and that she was fine with Mai officiating. *After all, this is Anything Goes, there being so few rules makes sense.* And as silently irritated and angry as Natsume was at Ranma for his earlier comments on their father and well... her jealousy that their father had chased after him so quickly, she wasn't willing to hurt him permanently. *Hurt, yes. Permanently no.*

With that, Mai raised a hand, and chopped it down. "Begin."

Instantly, Natsume whipped her carpet beater off her back, bringing it around in an equivalent of a I-ai strike. "Wind Slash!"

Ranma had charged forward but now leaped to the side as Natsume went on the attack, lashing out with a wind-pressure attack. Much like the variety he had seen used by Kuno and a few others he'd fought, it slashed through the air between them in the form of a long, thin, blast of tightly condensed wind.

He charged forward, keeping to the ground for now, and was not surprised when Natsume recovered instantly, and began to wield her carpet beater like Kuno could his sword sending more blasts of air towards him even as she retreated, circling around Ranma as he did the same. *She's faster than he is though and doesn't have to stand still.*

Hmm, let's see what she can do when I use an unusual weapon of my own. With that, Ranma allowed his rope weapon to appear once more from his sleeve. Going low, he ducked under one of her attacks rather than dodging to the side as he had been. Rolling forward, he whipped out the rope dart towards her.

“Hah!” Natsume took a single step to the side, flicking her carpet beater out to and twisting. The end of the rope dart passed through one of the holes in the carpet beater and the twist of her wrist wound the rope darts around it.

“Oh, ya shouldn’ta done that,” Ranma snorted and with barely any effort, twisting around as he did.

With a yelp, Natsume found herself in the air. But she didn’t try to resist, instead going with it, flipping through the air as she intoned, “Tendo Style: Cold Touch!”

As the others watched in surprise, Natsume’s weapon began to gleam almost with a cold blue light. This was followed by a chill as Natsume landed, pulling back quickly as Ranma leaped into the air after her. The chill instantly began to show as a line of frost on her weapon and the rope dart still wrapped around the carpet beater’s shaft. The rope began to freeze, turning solid, and grimacing, Ranma let his end of the weapon go.

He closed quickly then, while Natsume was busy trying to unloop the rope weapon from her carpet beater, tossing it over the side of the rooftop. She backpedaled, but Ranma now broke out his own wind attacks. “Er... Tornado kick!”

Twirling in place Ranma lashed out with an air strike, wider and without the same kind of cutting edge as Natsume’s attack, which had gauged small cuts into the rooftop. But it moved almost too fast for her to track but she was able to dodge it by taking to the air.

Yet almost at once, she realized this was a mistake as Ranma leaped up to meet her. “ACK!” Somehow, she was able to dodge a punch flipping herself into a kick, which was blocked by one of Ranma’s forearms. His other hand came up to smack her leg, using the momentum to gain height on her before sending an ax kick towards her head. She instantly raised her weapon, but the ax kick became a swing kick, smacking into her hand with punishing force, deadening her grip. Another punch sent her weapon away to land in a corner of the rooftop.

Pressing his advantage, Ranma attacked her several more times from the air, yet Natsume proved she wasn’t Kuno once more, as she used her hands and even feet to block his blows. Ranma was still able to move around her easily while in midair, landing several telling blows, including one that deadened her arm below the elbow. “UGH.”

Drat it, it’s obvious now why the Saotome style is called the aerial style. I, I can’t! Natsume tried to get back to the ground, but somehow Ranma punched her in such a way that she rose up instead, pulling her further away. *How is he doing this!? Time to do something I really don’t like doing!* “Cold Touch!” Natsume ground out, forcing Ranma to pause for a moment as some of the same cold aura she had used earlier covered her forearms.

“Huh, that’s an interesting trick but,” Ranma paused as Natsume twitched her forearm, loosening Kurumi’s ribbon around her wrist and sending it up into his face from pointblank range. “GAH!”

Ranma grunted as the edge of the ribbon smacked into his face with all the force of a whip, but recovered quickly. By the time he did though, Natsume was on the ground once more and backing away quickly, recalling her ribbon with another flick of her hand. Landing across from her, the two of them once more began circling. “Huh, neat bluff.”

“Thank you,” Natsume answered politely, hiding a grimace. Without her weapon to take in the cold her ki created, her forearms always became numb and prickly, and she had yet to be able to create enough cold to make her skin seem more than, say touching an ice cube. It was enough to make someone twitch, but it also caused her some trouble too. If Ranma had been able to dodge her ribbon, he could have kept up the pressure and won the fight.

Nearby, Shampoo was scowling in irritation, as was Mai, though it was the Shiranui heiress who spoke up first, her voice a low murmur under the shouts of Kurumi. “Why do you think Ranma isn’t using his full strength or speed?” Mai knew that Mai was good, her style was excellent, as well as her decision making. But she wasn’t nearly as fast or as strong as Ranma, who Mai had fought numerous times in the past month. “He should have finished it just then, regardless of that cold technique.”

“He’s holding back to learn from her. You know how obsessed he is with learning more about ki,” Shampoo grumbled back. “Still, if he ends up losing because he held back, I will laugh at him for weeks.”

Damn it, how is she doing that cold trick? I seriously need to figure out a way to see more about ki, not just feel it. I can sense she was doing something, some kind of energy moving through her body, but not what she was doing with it, Ranma grumbled internally. Beyond her ki attacks though, Natsume doesn’t seem all that special. Way better than Akane, maybe as good as Shampoo was when we first met? But she isn’t as fast or strong as she should be. Her style’s good, and she’s able to read me pretty well but I could end this anytime I wanted.

Unfortunately for Ranma, this attitude gave Natsume a chance to put her plan into motion. When Ranma charged forward, she instantly rolled backwards, staying on the ground and shifting her position instantly in various directions. As she shifted them around, though, Ranma got between her and her weapon, much to her disappointment and she slowly retreated backwards, circling around for a few seconds once more before charging in.

At first Ranma thought she had made a mistake, but then she whirled in place, the ribbon whirling around her in a move Ranma could tell was taken from Martial Arts Rhythmic Gymnastics. Ranma charged forward, but the ribbon whirled up and around Natsume, creating a defensive dome, something Ranma had seen before from Master Nawa. Still, Ranma knew how to deal with that, and his hands shifted into chops, cutting the ribbon.

“Cold Wave!” Natsume shouted, just as the ribbon began to come apart. The dome of the ribbon came apart, blasting out a cold wind, cold enough to chill even Ranma.

Ranma gasped as the cold front of him, actually covering his arms with frost. It dissipated quickly, but it halted his charge, and then Natsume was on him, lashing out with a punch that caught him in the stomach, and a kick that nearly caught him in the leg. He dodged around it, his own hands flashing out and crashing into her.

“GAH!” Natsume groaned, hurled backward, she rolled with the fall, putting even more distance between them. *Blessed Amaterasu, he’s strong! But...*

It was only as he saw the direction, Ranma realized he had made a mistake and raced back. Natsume smirked, kicking off of the ground with both feet, launching a mule kick at the charging Ranma, which he dodged. But that had been her plan, and instead of connecting, she flung her body backwards into a series of twirls taken straight from rhythmic gymnastics, whipping the remaining length of ribbon into Ranma’s face, letting it leave her forearm as he dodged and grabbed at it.

This move set her aside her weapon once more, and she flicked it into her hands with her foot. “Tendo Style: Ice Tornado!” She whirled like a top carrying on the move with her carpet beater sending a loose tornado of chilled air towards Ranma.

The cold cause him to flinch even as he tried to dodge out of the way, but this wind attack spread too quickly, and it picked him up, hurling him away to crash down into the rooftop with enough force to be heard by some of the theater workers below, causing him to grunt in pain.

“It’s over, Ranma!” Natsume shouted, whipping her carpet beater around her again, creating another dome-like defense, this one of chilly air. *I can’t create ice just yet, but I can come close.* “I know you are dangerous, but you can’t close through this amount of wind!”

From where he crouched, Ranma grimaced, as it was kind of true. *I can’t close through the air for sure, not when she can turn the air against me. Bah. Still, I could just charge in, taking the hits, if I could get my center of gravity close enough to the ground, overwhelm her with my speed and strength again when I get close. And I would if she had kept this a pure physical type of match. But if she wants this to be a ki battle... Heh.*

Instead of looking worried, Natsume was somewhat disturbed to see Ranma hop up, a grin on his face. “Well, if we’re gonna be using ki, I got some more of those kinds of attacks myself.”

Her eyes narrowing, Natsume worked her arms ever faster, the dome of cold air around her growing, forming into a tighter, stronger series of attacks, “Well then, let us see which of our attacks is stronger.”

“Let’s,” Ranma answered with a snort, gathering his ki as he had during the escape training back with Musubime Osoroshi. Since his first experiments with it, Ranma had learned how to move his ki around his body, although he still lacked the extreme level of control and shaping the school regularly taught. He did so now, gathering it into his fist and charging forward.

Seeing him coming, Natsume whipped her carpet beater forward, launching her own assault. “Ice Tornado!”

The bow wave of Natsume’s attack came toward Ranma who had already crossed the majority of the distance between them at a speed that caused Natsume’s eyes to widen even as she launched her attack. “Hmm... how about.... Ki Pulse Punch!”

Ranma still didn’t have enough control to really shape his ki at all, not into a visible attack, but he didn’t really need to. Instead, he simply directed it creating something like the blast of ki he had used originally. But focused like this, it had a lot more power. Power that Ranma could not control. *FUCK, I still can’t figure out how to limit this thing!*

The two attacks crashed together, and Ranma’s burst through Natsume’s like a spear through a thin wooden shield, dissipating her attack and blasting on too fast for Natsume to dodge. “What in...” The next instant, Ranma’s attack hit her, exploding as it did, destroying her weapon and to Ranma’s chagrin, her clothing, shredding the school uniform she had been wearing and flinging her backward naked across the roof, where she rolled with a cry of pain.

“...” For a moment, the entire rooftop was silent as Ranma stared, a drizzle of blood appearing from his nose as both Mai and Shampoo took in the view as well, nodding internally at the fitness of the other girl even as Shampoo began to growl in annoyance. Natsume was thinner in the hips and waist than Shampoo, a but was similarly sized Shampoo in the chest area, although her breasts did not look as firm as Shampoo’s, and they were tipped with tiny rose-tinted nipples. Below that, she had a wild thatch of hair covering her womanly parts.

Then the moment broke as Natsume realized her nakedness, and screaming aloud in shock as she tried to curl up in place. “EEEEEP!! Wh, what!? How!?”

Ranma instantly shook his head, breaking his own stasis and turning aside, pulling a spare shirt from his ki space and tossing it towards her. “I, I think I won the match, right? We can call it quits now, right?” he stammered as he turned away.

“Agreed. Considering he broke your attack Natsume, I’m going to give Ranma the win,” Mai said hastening over and helping Natsume into the shirt, putting her body between Natsume and Ranma, while Shampoo stomped over to him, growling and tugging at his ear in irritation.

“E, even without that, I have to admit defeat,” Natsume grunted getting to her feet with some difficulty wincing now. Without her last trick, Ranma would easily overcome her with his sheer physicality, which wasn’t something Natsume had ever thought to say. “Your attack utterly overwhelmed me, and even before that I could sense the fighting was going against me. You beat me fair and square...senpai,” she said, now gaining a bit of her courage back as she saw Ranma still looking away with a blush.

Shampoo’s eyes narrowed at that, and she moved over to Ranma, putting an arm around his waist, while Kurumi bounced between the two groups excitedly. “Shampoo read enough manga know where that tone lead,” she muttered.

“Those attacks of yours are really interesting, but I think you might need more versatility,” Mai mused as she supplied a pair of shorts for Natsume.

“Oh, that’s a surprise, the ninja girl with all the tricks is talking about versatility,” Ranma taunted, getting a ‘hush you’ in response, although Mai was somewhat proud of the fact that Ranma, an insanely versatile fighter himself, thought her skills were dangerous. While Ranma was able to defeat her in nearly every match they’d had when they were at the Musubime Osoroshi school, the few times they had fought one another without any of the local rules she had been able to push and even beat both Ranma and Shampoo thanks to her wider variety of tricks and abilities. Her Bunshin and Shadow Fan tricks fooled Shampoo regularly, while her limited ability to create smoke and her limited pyromancy tended to at least force Ranma on the defensive.

“But she is right,” Ranma went on speaking over Mai’s response. “Your style is pretty good, but I think you need to work on strength and durability. Mind you, that’s true for all of us, given how Honda tossed me and Shampoo around whenever he landed a hit.”

“I think that a tree should not look to the mountain and feel envy,” Natsume drawled, shaking her head. “You’re aiming rather high there, aren’t you?”

“You have to aim high if you want to be the best,” Ranma answered instantly.

“I also think they should build up more combat experience,” Shampoo opined from where she was hanging on Ranma. “You seemed to freeze at least twice in that fight, yes?”

Natsume grimaced but nodded. “I will admit that my sister and I do not often find opponents of our caliber that can truly push us as much as this battle did. Even when we occasionally challenge dojos, the master is not a challenge more often than not.”

“In that case, maybe we...” Shampoo’s words were interrupted by the growl of stomachs. Ranma’s roared like that of a lion, while Kurumi’s snarled like that of a hungry wolf, the two sounds competing as if the animals themselves were there ready to fight it out.

When the sound subsided, it was quickly replaced by Shampoo and Mai nearly falling over one another laughing, while Natsume stared at Ranma, then at Kurumi, a look of horror on her face. "Oh no, there are two of them!"

"Come on," Mai said between giggles, "Let's get a proper meal in both of you, Natsume, Kurumi. And maybe, unless the two of you have some packs around somewhere, you need some clothing too?" While Shampoo and Ranma had a somewhat limited budget, the two of them not having gone 'hunting' for a while, Mai had her own bank account, and the Shiranui school was actually quite solvent due to several long-term investments of her father. And she had no problem using her money for other people, even nearly complete strangers like Natsume and Kurumi, if they needed it.

Natsume made to protest, but Kurumi grabbed her hand and squeezed, smiling at the ninja girl. "That would be a lot of help. In fact, Natsume and I don't have a lot of money, and the clothing we're currently wearing is actually one of only three sets we. Or..." she paused, looking at her older sister, "er, used to have, before Ranma destroyed Natsume's."

Her older sister blushed heavily at that, pointedly looking away from Ranma once more who had also glanced away at that point. He was the first man to see her like that since she had puberty and she wasn't quite certain what to think about it. It had been part of a martial arts attack which had smashed through her own, and he had apologized, and yet some of part of her was telling her she should smack him with a frying iron.

"Clothing first then. Sorry Kurumi, Ranma, or should I say Kurumi and Ranma's stomachs? Which is in the driver's seat right now?" Mai teased before finishing, "It will be a while yet before you're fed."

"My lord and master can wait for a bit, he's just soundin' off because it's that time of day," Ranma said in reply, patting his stomach, while Kurumi just giggled, and said she'd just eat more later. *Although really, it's more because of that blasted ki attack. The damn thing still drains me way too much. I'm doing it wrong still. I can direct it, but there needs to be a better way to cut it off, to shape it better... hmm... or maybe...* Shaking his head, Ranma smiled over at Mai. "And thanks Mai. I'll pay you back for whatever clothing you buy Natsume. A senpai has to watch over his kouhai, after all."

That wiped away Natsume's blush and she huffed a little in irritation, although if one were to look closely, one could see a faint blush returning to her features and not due to embarrassment this time. "I'm older than you. I still say I'm not your kouhai."

"Eh, we can fight about it again later. For now, clothing, and then I think you might need to find an all-you-can eat restaurant for Kurumi," Ranma answered.

When they arrived at the nearest clothing store, Shampoo elected to stay outside, while Mai took Natsume and Kurumi inside the store for a moment. When they were gone, Shampoo

looked at Ranma speculatively. “Why do you want those two to stay with us?” she articulated carefully, keeping any inflection of accusation or annoyance out of her voice with difficulty. She did **not** want two other girls around Ranma.

Having picked up on some of her emotions despite that, Ranma bit back a scowl of his own, taking the question at face value. “Like I said to Natsume, as the senior student, I have an obligation to ‘em. I think we need to keep them with us for a bit. Not for long, maybe a few weeks or so. But beyond that, they’re good girls too. I’d want to help them for their own right not just as fellow members of Anything Goes

Shampoo sighed, some of her annoyance fading, both at Ranma’s words, and the fact that she agreed with him on that score at least. *So long as they don’t stay with us for a long time, I can put up with the two of them being around. Well, unless Natsume starts making eyes at Ranma anyway.*

In Shampoo’s mind, having listened to several of her Amazon sisters and listened to their woes, rivals were the last thing she wanted. Having Mai around was fine. Mai was interested in Andy, and the two of them had gotten to know one of the other over the past month, becoming very close friends. Natsume and Kurumi however were complications. *And while I don’t want to... get rid of them as some of my sisters have dealt with such in the past, I am also not willing to let Natsume even grow a crush on Ranma, let alone anything more serious.*

“Shampoo that is, I think you are right they are not as good at living on the road as you are. Even my clan teaches a few ‘underhanded’ means of making life on the road easier we could teach them, pouching, pickpocketing, and such. I would also like to test their simple woodcraft skills.” She then held up a finger, bopping Ranma on the nose. “But Shampoo, oh darn it!” She lost her train of thought for a moment, switching to cursing in Chinese, while Ranma snickered at her annoyance, grabbed her hand and held it there for a moment.

“Hmhf, Ranma just wait until it time to practice his Putonghua. Then he see,” Shampoo grumped, although she did not try to regain control of her hand, simply twinning her fingers with Ranma’s. “But I demand a big-time romantic date tonight. With two more people around, I know you too well to think that we’re going to have enough romantic time when we start moving again.”

“That was already in the cards so yer not asking me for anything I wouldn’t be doing otherwise.” Ranma paused, then decided to be upfront about the concern that had been growing in him since Shampoo had first reacted to Natsume and Kurumi. *Being upfront has worked so far with Shampoo, especially back in Nerima, so hopefully it’ll work here too.*

“But I gotta say Shampoo, you coming all over jealous and territorial like you did, I didn’t like that at all. I mean your angry face is kind of...” He blushed a bit, somewhat torn before going on resolutely. “Kind of sexy? But I really didn’t like how jealous you got just by seeing two

girls around me. I ain't the kind to flirt with people, I have enough trouble flirting with you, and were already in a relationship. I don't know why you got all jealous and angry but the lack of trust hurt."

At that Shampoo winced, slumping a bit, and thumping her shoulder against Ranma's. The two of them were sitting on a raised wall surrounding a tree near the clothing store, having moved there after Mai let the other two into the store.

He obligingly put an arm around her, pulling her into a sideways hug, and when she spoke, her accent came out in full strength, a sign of her momentary distress. "Shampoo is sorry. Shampoo raised on stories of outsider men, even met many Amazon took outsider men as husbands. Always coming in two category, if strong enough defeat Amazon woman. One, good honorable, willing to let Amazon lead in most things. Second type, full of himself, arrogant, flirting with other women. Even knowing Ranma, for a moment, Shampoo thought... Well, Shampoo worried. Know she shouldn't. But see girls, horror stories come back to Shampoo's mind."

"I can understand that I guess. Just promise to always hear me out, okay? Like I said, I'm not exactly a... what's the name of those tanned guys we've sometimes ambushed? Er... it ain't ganguro, that's the gals like Misaki... well, whatever. I ain't them. And I like to say that I'm not the kind to get my head turned by girls, you know?"

"Oh, what about earlier?" Shampoo asked archly, some of her self-control coming back, now that Ranma seems to have moved beyond his anger at her. "You seemed to be a little stunned by Natsume."

"Oh, come on! Just because I don't flirt with other girls doesn't mean I don't have a pulse!" Ranma grumbled, before becoming serious, squeezing Shampoo just a bit. "But seriously, always hear me out and don't just jump to conclusions. That's something Akane... hell all the Tendos did a lot of, and it was one of the worst aspects of living there."

Wincing a bit, Shampoo nodded firmly. *No way am I going to let Ranma compare me to that talentless oaf of a girl! And isn't communication and trust really important in a relationship? I really should have trusted him, regardless of those stories from the older women back in the village. Or... or maybe I missed something in them? Ugh, is this what growing up is like, knowing when to admit your mistakes?* "Shampoo promise to listen, if Ranma promise to always be straight with Shampoo."

Ranma grinned, the tension in his body and voice leaving him as he pulled Shampoo against him even a little tighter, his hands moving from where they'd been around her shoulders, to into her hair and down to the small of her back, making the hug a far more tender, loving thing than it had been previously. "Agreed. In that case, do you want to split off after the girls come out for our date, or stay with them for the meal like we planned before I found Natsume and Kurumi?"

OOOOOOO

Meanwhile, inside the clothing store Kurumi was questioning Mai as Natsume went around the store looking for the cheapest items they could get. The older girl had a very firm opinion on how much she was willing to go into debt into anyone, believing it was beneath their dignity as martial artists to live off the charity of others.

Kurumi, on the other hand, was just looking forward to having some new clothing, particularly underwear, and had her mind on other things. With the promise of food to come and clothing now, her mind had gone back to the third most important thing: the fact Ranma had met their father. "Ranma was telling us about how his father and ours were trying to drag him back to the dojo. Since you have fought the two masters, do you think Ranma's right about why both of them are so set on it? That they had this plan where one creates a dojo, and then the other brings in a real style? But... but if so, why did he leave that training manual with us?"

"You've got a point with the manual, that's true, but really, I'm not the one to ask. Heck, Shampoo isn't the one to ask. Remember, she only met Soun once before she and Ranma left, and as far as I know, they've only fought once or twice maybe since? I've only fought the guy once, so it's not like I know what the old guys are thinking or anything," Mai answered somewhat hesitantly.

Mai really didn't want to feed what looked like an obsession to her, but she also didn't want to completely burst their bubbles about what kind of person their father might be. *Ranma didn't exactly paint a good picture of the guy earlier, or whenever he spoke about Nerima this past month. But maybe he might have had some redeeming qualities... At some point in the distant past, anyway. It's true that training manual seems to have really helped these two.*

Kurumi pouted, at which point Natsume joined them, just to hear her mutter "It, it's just I am really, really worried now. I mean, Natsume and I, we've brought one another up on ideas of what our father might be like. Of appearing triumphant at the Tendo Dojo's doors to be immediately recognized as his daughters, to earn our place as his heirs. But now, we learn that he's got three other girls, hasn't trained even the one who seems interested in the martial arts, and never hinted at knowing the two of us. I'm just worried about what kind of person he really is."

"That is something we will have to decide for ourselves upon meeting him," Natsume announced, patting her younger sister on the shoulder. "I will admit to having had more than a few... Hundred... Thousand... Doubts about what sort of person or father could be, having left us as he did so long ago. I do not blame Father for not finding us afterwards, but as I grew up, the initial leaving has started to strike me as irresponsible at best, suspicious and worrying at worst. The only thing that has offset that opinion is the training manual and the written promise he left with us. And you must admit Kurumi, you saw how good it was today against Ranma."

“That is true, and it’s a point Kurumi just raised too. But... I know Ranma mentioned how his father and yours fought him, but I will tell you this girls: from what I saw in the one fight with the two of them I’ve had, Natsume is stronger than the Soun Tendo Ranma, Shampoo and I fought,” Mai opined.

Both girls stared at her in shock. “I, I know that Ranma said our Father went down faster than his, but, but how can you be so certain I am stronger than him? I’m merely a student, he’s a master!” Natsume protested. Honestly, she had merely thought that the three younger folk had ambushed the two patriarchs somehow and overcome them through trickery before this. But Mai sounded so certain, and as a student of an unaligned school, one Natsume had heard of, her words carried a lot of weight.

Mai shrugged her shoulders. “We planned out a trap for the two of them, using a lot of different field traps we took from Master Nawa. While Genma, that is, Ranma’s father, was able to get through them, in his panda form mind you, Soun was caught easily. After that, a single hit knocked him out. Soun seems to let himself go very badly.”

“...I think there is a lot going on here we don’t know,” Natsume said, pushing her younger sister towards the changing area, with several sets of clothing in her arms. “And I think we need to refrain from judgment on our father until we actually meet the man in person. We can do that either by forcing Ranma to tell us how to find the Tendo dojo or sticking with him for a while, but while I am willing to listen to what Ranma can tell us of the man and our... our sisters, I refuse to think the same man who...”

“Who weeps at the drop of a hat? I admit I haven’t seen that yet,” Mai answered with a snort. “Still, I don’t doubt Ranma or Shampoo on that point.”

“Regardless, I refuse to think that same man was able to teach us how to live off the land and create the training manual he then left with us which we have used to train ourselves to the degree we have would be so weak Perhaps something happened to sap his strength.”

Seeing the stubborn look in Natsume’s eyes, Mai decided to throw the girl a bone. “Well, maybe the death of his wife struck him so hard he just... never came back to himself. From what Ranma has told me and Shampoo, it’s obvious none of the daughters who live with Soun would be able to force him to shape up. Maybe you will.”

At that, both girls in front of her nodded, looking quite happy with that idea, and Mai went on. “Regardless, I’d vote for the two of you to stick with us. And I’m pretty sure Ranma will too. You seem like nice girls, but you need some life lessons smacked into your heads.” With that, Mai pushed past Natsume looking at a skirt behind her. “Ooh, this looks like it would look good on you, Natsume.”

“W, but, but that’s so expensive, I absolutely cannot...”

“Oh stop it. A single shopping spree, especially at a WEGO isn’t going to cost me enough to matter.” She pulled it off the rack, nodding firmly. “Anyway, I suppose you can get Ranma to tell you where this place is, although whether or not Soun will be there is a question. We sent Genma off to the zoo, and I honestly don’t know if Soun will try to free him, come after Ranma on his own, or give up. As I said, I don’t have that great an understanding of the man in question.”

Natsume nodded understanding, but was about to set that aside to protest the idea of Mai spending so much money on them when Mai held the skirt up to Natsume’s legs. “Now, get in there and try this on! Oh, I love having another girl to dress up again!”

“Now wait just a minute, I really don’t think...” Mai began, only for Mai to pull up a bra that had Natsume blushing, her words disappearing into a stuttering halt. “I, I can’t wear that!”

“Every girl should have something that makes them feel good. And you most certainly can, trust me, from what I saw, this is perfectly your size,” Mai drawled. “With all the trouble I have finding ones in my own size, I’m something of an expert.”

That caused Natsume’s blush to rise to atomic levels, and perhaps because of the sudden shift of blood to her head, Natsume couldn’t protest as Mai pushed her into a changing room beside her sister. Resignedly she turned to the mirror on the wall, her sister’s giggles echoing to her from the stall next door. *Well, today has certainly not gone anywhere near the direction I thought it would. I wonder what other surprises will come our way if we do decide to travel with these three?*

OOOOOOO

By the time the three girls came out, it was definitely dinner time, judging by the little growls Ranma’s stomach had been letting out every few minutes now. Ignoring the noises coming from her Airen’s bottomless pit, Shampoo sat, her legs drawn up as she attempted to meditate, while Ranma perched on the back like a monkey, occasionally flipping himself to his hands and doing one-handed push-ups.

They both looked up with relief as the three girls appeared at last, with Kurumi dragging the other two along, the growl of her own stomach going before her like the bugles of an advancing army, joining Ranma’s in an unholy chorus. “Come on! Mai’s been nice enough to get us some clothing but now I need food!”

“Kurumi, you’re being rude! And Mai please don’t even think about paying for the food. While my sister and I are not well off, we can at least pay for our own food,” Natsume began, trying to repair some of her destroyed dignity.

"If you could do that, why was she running around stealing food before?" Ranma asked rhetorically, taking in the girls and their outfit changes. "And you both look nice by the way. Mai does good work, although judging by how she dresses, I suppose we should've assumed that."

Gone were the two disparate, and raggedy, school uniforms, or rather, the one school uniform Kurumi had been wearing. After all, Natsume's had already been destroyed by Ranma's out of control Aura fist technique. In its place, Natsume wore long loose pants, much like Ranma's own, coupled with a simple shirt that, while not formfitting, definitely showed off the fact she was a good-looking young girl.

Still, it was evident that despite Mai's best efforts, she had simply grab something that was both cheap and comfortable. Kurumi, on the other hand, wore a skirt, a long light red one coupled with a red and white striped blouse. It hugged her chest and stomach a good deal more than Natsume's cheap shirt, and Ranma honestly thought it was a little too much for a girl her age but he understood he was a prude when it came to this kind of thing. *And thankfully she doesn't have nearly as much to show as her older sister does.*

Natsume blushed faintly, looking away, and Shampoo had to stand down on another irrational surge of jealousy. *Darn it girl, you just promised your Airen that you wouldn't jump to conclusions. He's just being nice.* "Ranma's right," she said aloud, although her inner struggle did rob her of a bit of her hard-gotten gains in speaking Japanese rather than pidgin. "You both look good, if very differently than Shampoo thought you would."

"Yeah, I kind of figured Kurumi to be the one to go for pants and shirt, she gives me serious tomboy vibes," Ranma mused, before catching Kurumi's punch at his midsection in his palm. "What is it about that word that gets girls so cranky? It isn't really an insult, it's just an observation." *Of all the things I didn't like about Akane, her being a tomboy wasn't one of them. Heck, maybe if she had been a better tomboy she might have forced her father to train her.*

Snorting, Mai explained that Natsume didn't want her to buy anything that would look actually good on her, not wanting to have Mai spend more money on her than she had to. "Despite my telling her it didn't matter."

"Mai, as martial artists we cannot simply inveigle upon your good graces like that. It wouldn't be right. But my sister and I had a question for you Ranma. Would you be willing to tell us where the Tendo dojo is? Or do you think it would be simply better for us to stay with you for a time?"

"I want you to stay with me for a bit. Sending you to Nerima without Soun there to speak for you would just get you into trouble. For one thing, just knowing me would probably set Akane and maybe her sisters against you and I ain't going back there myself."

"Shampoo think... drat! I think Ranma just doesn't want to be roped into anything," she teased, pulling out one of her own rope weapons and gently thumping Ranma on the side of it.

Mai and Natsume both laughed remembering how Ranma had started the fight with Natsume, while Kurumi and Ranma groaned, with Ranma muttering, "Oh God, please don't let her like puns! Why have I been hurt like this?" But then he shook his head, focusing on the topic in question again. "But yeah, I also really don't want to run into Akane or either of her sisters again."

Natsume looked interested, cocking her eye in question, but Ranma did not elaborate, instead going on. "Mai, Shampoo and I decided to travel down to the Shiranui School, which is down on Kyushu. And I think the two of you should travel with us for a bit. It's obvious that you've got some stuff we can learn and you two have a lot to learn from us too."

Again, Natsume looked a little affronted at that fact but she had to acknowledge that Ranma was telling the truth. The three of them had far more combat experience than she and Kurumi for certain, and Ranma had very demonstrably pointed out that he personally had quite a bit to teach them. "I won't say I am interested in learning the Stripping Fist, but I will admit that there is some merit in learning from you beyond that."

"Hey! It's called the Aura Fist, not the Stripping Fist!" Ranma squawked in outrage, having come up with that term a moment ago. It isn't a real ki attack, but it can be deadly.

Natsume huffed, turning away haughtily although when she spoke, her tone was more teasing than censorious, getting used to how causal these three were. It was not something she had much experience with outside her sister, but she still kind of liked it. "I tell it like I see it."

"I'm wondering as your senior, can I get away with spanking you?" Ranma grumbled as Mai, Shampoo and Kurumi all laughed, with Shampoo even shouting out about how he had done much the same every time he tried to use that technique.

"And that line really doesn't make her concerns about that technique any less valid, you know" Mai added to Shampoo's words.

"All right, I know when I'm getting ganged up on. Anyway, while you were in there, Shampoo and I decided we wanted to start our date, so we're going to go off now. We'll see you all back at the hotel." Natsume made to protest the idea that they would be rooming with the original trio, but Ranma wouldn't hear of it, simply waving it off saying, "If you're worried about money, the hotels only charge the people they see entering, and we've already got a room with two beds and a sofa. All you have to do, or me and Shampoo, anyway, enter the room from the window."

At that Natsume and Kurumi both looked affronted and Ranma slowly shook his head. "You have much to learn about the line between what is honorable and dishonorable when you're on the road, my young padawans." That line won a round of laughs but Ranma went on seriously. "Dishonorable would be attacking people for their money, just surviving is grabbing

some food. Dishonorable would be breaking and entering, damaging public property and so forth. Simply getting in, using their bed, and cleaning up after yourself doesn't harm anyone."

Natsume paused that, biting her lip lightly, while Kurumi gave her the dreaded puppy dog eyes attack. "I rather would like to sleep in a real bed for once, rather than in a chair or out on a rooftop somewhere. Our sleeping gear has also survived well past its best years."

Her little sister on the other hand had her mind on something else entirely and as Natsume gave in, she whooped in delight. "Woohoo! A real shower!"

While Ranma couldn't understand the need for one of those, after all rivers were a thing, he was happy to two of them had stopped arguing, and decided to end the discussion on a high note. He and Shampoo bid the three girls a good night, and with Ranma in the lead, took off over the rooftops.

Behind them, Natsume watched them go with a faint smile. *Ranma is somewhat uncouth, and more than a bit rogue, but he is a likable sort. In a way, it's a pity he's already taken.*

OOOOOOO

Halfway to the beach, Ranma and Shampoo had split off. Shampoo had wanted to change her clothing before they met up once more for the date, and Ranma decided to go with the same idea considering where they were going: the island's beach. But instead of going with his female body, Ranma decided to be daring and stay in his male form. *After all, I've spent most of this past month in my female form. I think I'm due for at least a week without being turned into a girl.*

With that in mind, Ranma changed into his one set of swim trunks, before pulling on a button-down shirt, one of the few semi-dressy kind of shirts he had and a backpack to hold his stuff and Shampoo's the inside marginally ki expanded for now, since this outfit didn't have pockets and he doubted Shampoo's swimsuit would either. This didn't take him long, and moments later, he was walking out of the changing area, and moving over to a nearby bench, leaning against it as he reflected on the day. Even at this time of night, the place was still hopping, with a lot of bars open, and there were several parties going on along the beach. There were even a few open-air dance clubs, various areas with games, and even in one, area, family oriented stuff.

Ranma took it all in at a glance, then turned his eyes out onto the ocean, watching the sun slowly setting. Meeting two other practitioners of Anything Goes was something I never thought I'd ever do, hell I kinda assumed it was just the Aerial school that survived. Akane sure as heck never shown anything from the Tendo school. *From what I've seen, Kurumi could probably beat her, easy. And Natsume would smack her around the place without breaking a sweat. Still, I'm very damn glad that the whole joining of the school staying didn't come up.*

Natsume and Kurumi have already been messed up enough, they don't need something like that hanging over their heads. And I for damn sure don't need the complication!

...Although I am still wondering about the full story there. If they are Soun's daughters, why did he leave? How the heck did he have them at the same time he was dealing with having Nabiki and Akane, let alone having a girl a few years older like Kasumi? Did he really have a Mistress on the side, who died or something, while his real wife was sick? If so, maybe leaving the book behind is an honorable way of dealing with it, but even so it isn't that honorable a way. And if he was able to write down notes that they were able to figure out and create those cold and wind based techniques, why the heck didn't Soun keep using them? He would've been a lot more impressive if so.

Could it really be the whole concussion idea I thought of? Honestly that is the only way I could see Soun doing something like that and then forgetting about two of his girls. Say what you will about him he did care for Kasumi and the other two, in his own weepy way. So... was it my Old Man who trained them? That... anyway you look at it, that seems way more likely. I know he frequented brothels a few times in China, and maybe before we left Japan. I...

Realizing his thoughts were going around in a circle, Ranma shook his head and turned, staring out over the beach, watching the people having fun, snickering slightly as he saw what looked like some kind of dance competition. Even the best of the dancers looked completely uncoordinated his eyes. *I could do better after downing my Old Man's entire stash of sake and with my eyes closed.*

"Ranma!" came a call from behind him.

Ranma turned, and stared, a faint blush coming to his face. Shampoo was wearing a two-piece bathing suit, not a bikini, although Ranma really wasn't quite clear on where the difference between a two-piece bathing suit and bikini really was. Regardless, it wasn't quite as 'sexy' as Ranma thought a bikini was supposed to be. Instead, the sexiness of the vision before him was almost entirely supplied by the body underneath the suit. The top looks like a sports bra almost, a dark violet color that almost matched Shampoo's hair, covering her breasts but letting her six-pack stomach be seen underneath it. The bottom on the other hand was white, and covered by a see-through skirt thing Ranma didn't know the name of, the color of that being a light blue, dragging attention to Shampoo's full, powerfully built hips.

"Wow..." he breathed out, before shaking his head, holding out his hand to Shampoo. "You look great, Shampoo!"

"Thank you, Airen." Shampoo preened, snuggling into his arm, looking down at her shirt with a faint giggle. "You look good too, prepared for the beach anyway. Although I was worried that you would pick one of the too too bright shirts, too many men around here are wearing."

“What, the Hawaiian style ones? No way. That would be a monstrosity,” Ranma answered, getting a laugh from Shampoo.

OOOOOOO

Elsewhere, Kocho Kuno sneezed, his fist going through the target ahead of him. The scissors in his hand sliced the target into pieces, although the sneeze did mean Kocho messed up his targeting just a bit, completely missing the side of his target’s head. He ignored that though as he stared up at the sky, a scowl on his face. “Someone has dishonored the Hawaiian shirt! The Big Kahuna will...”

The next instant, his master’s walking stick smacked into the back of his head. “Get back to work slacker! Finding whoever is dissing the Hawaiian style can come at another time!”

OOOOOOO

Ranma and Shampoo walked around for a time, skirting the edge of the ocean, moving through the rest of the crowds, ignoring the looks that Shampoo was getting from some of the boys and Ranma was getting from some of the girls. Instead, they simply flirted with one another, with Shampoo snuggled against Ranma’s side and making no effort to move from that position.

Ranma still wasn’t the best at flirting, at least not verbally, but he had scored a few hits by the time they had gotten to the small ramen shack they had decided on earlier. In particular, he led Shampoo through an impromptu dance to a romantic song playing nearby, and Shampoo was blushing and quite happy with how the night had gone so far by the time they had found a place to eat.

Taking their food to go, the two of them moved away from the crowds towards a few large rocks, only to find that the area was somewhat occupied. Low whimpers and whispered voices came from behind the rocks the two of them had perched on. The two martial artists looked at one another, faint blushes on their face and Shampoo indicated with a shake of her head that they should leave to which Ranma nodded firmly, following her off the rocks and back to the boardwalk for a moment.

Looking around, Ranma spotting what he wanted ways down the beach: a hotel directly on the beach with its own beach area there. The hotel itself wasn’t full, as several of the hotel rooms had their lights off, which was a certain sign that either the people there were out, or the room wasn’t being used. “Come on, I know a place we can go.”

Shampoo nodded and followed after him, with the two of them taking to the rooftops at one point, before hopping up toward it without even needing to even put their hot meals into their ki space. Both had already discovered that was a bad move over the past few months.

There, Ranma dropped onto a hotel room's balcony, gesturing Shampoo into the chair opposite him.

"Is this another skill of Anything Goes living off the land?" Shampoo teased as she sat down across from him, setting her bowl down next to his, and pulling out several alcoholic drinks from the backpack. She had wanted to try some of them since they had looked so tasty, and the ki space already chilled them nicely. *I think we need to figure out a way to use that better in the future. Having a refrigerator along with us is something we need to take advantage of.*

"It's like I told Natsume earlier, doing something like this, we ain't hurtin' nothin'," Ranma said, in what amounted to a Kansai accent, the equivalent of a hick accent in America.

Shampoo laughed, shaking her head. That had been the same way Ranma had spoken when they had first met in her village, and then again in the cave. But now, and she knew it was a shame. Ranma was far smarter than he let on at times.

The two of them talked for a time as they ate their meal, staring out over the ocean waves as somewhere nearby someone set off a series of fireworks to celebrate something or other. It wasn't a festival, but it was still impressive, and lit up the ocean brilliantly now that it was nighttime.

They talked for a time about what they would do after they reached Mai's home, both of them acknowledging without words that by that point, Natsume and Kurumi would either have moved on, or would be left behind at that point. Because after reaching Kyushu and spending time there in the Shiranui school, Ranma and Shampoo would be looking to move on from Japan entirely.

Whether or not Mai came with them was a question. Ranma was interested in meeting this guy that Mai was so sweet on, and if they could convince him to come with them, two couples traveling the road would be kind of fun, especially if Andy could be a good rival for Ranma like Mai was for Shampoo. The two girls were far closer in basic physical abilities speed, strength and so forth than either of them were to Ranma, although the tricks and abilities they both had could make any match with Ranma interesting, more Mai than Shampoo if he was honest.

Eventually however, they were done with the food and drinks and the conversation had petered out. The tension which had been growing between them since they had seen one another in their swimsuits came back now in force thanks in part due to the alcohol, which had made Shampoo at least kind of tipsy, though it hadn't affected Ranma much. They took glances at one another then out towards the ongoing fireworks, each of them almost waiting to see which would cave and make a move first.

Given Ranma's normal hesitance in this particular battlefield, it was no surprise to Shampoo that she would have to make the first move. Luckily, she was more than happy with that idea. She lifted one leg, slowly languidly, making certain that Ranma was watching as she unhooked her diaphanous skirt off, showing no sign of her tipsiness beyond a slight reddening to her cheeks. She let her leg fall to one side, rolling slightly on her hips before kicking up lightly out of the chair with her other leg so that she covered the small intervening distance between them while Ranma was concentrating on election lifted the air, right up until Shampoo landed in his lap, where she pressed her swimsuit clad chest against his shirt-clad pecs, and instantly kissed him hard on the mouth.

Ranma had been staring at Shampoo's leg with almost laser-like focus, and now his eyes went wide as she performed her little acrobatic maneuver. It wasn't like it was an amazing trick or anything like that, but Shampoo had made it sexy. Now, his eyes closed as he kissed her back just as hard. One arm went around Shampoo, while the other one moved between their bodies, gently stroking up and down her side and stomach for a bit. His other hand after pulling Shampoo tightly against them moved down to her rear, gripping it hard.

Oh my, yes. Airen is finally learning to be a bit forceful. Shampoo moaned into the kiss, and their tongues darted to duel, Ranma's dominating hers for a time in her mouth, as he began to explore that moist cavern.

But Shampoo was not an idle lover. Even as most of her concentration was on their kiss, her hands went to work, undoing the buttons of his shirt and pushing it off his shoulders onto the back of the chair they were sitting in. She also began grinding her core against him. Feeling the literally rising ardor underneath her Oh, lips widened into a smile.

But when his shirt was off, one hand moved up her back to play with his hair. This caused a brief murmur of protest from Ranma for some reason, but Shampoo ignored him, pulling the string keeping his hair in his pigtail, wanting to run her fingers through his hair.

And that was when everything went wrong.

Ranma's eyes widened as he felt the string coming loose, and a second later pushed Shampoo away. "Shampoo don't!" but too late. Only a quick twitch and a bite grabbed at the string before it fell.

The string was not a normal string. Instead it was what was called a Dragon's Whisker, an ingredient in a soup that was supposed to cure baldness. In already bald people. When Ranma had, in a fit of hunger, knocked out a thief running away with such a soup and then proceeded to eat it, he had been cursed with ever-growing hair. Hair that would keep growing until he, in turn, went bald. The man who had made the soup gave him the Dragon's Whisker to lock away this power.

As Ranma reacted, his hair exploded, erupting in huge curls in every direction right into Shampoo's surprised face and along their bodies, pinning Ranma's hands in place for a second. "AIREN!?" Ranma's hair grabbed at the chair, at the balcony's banister, and pushed against the glass behind him as Ranma struggled, trying to push Shampoo off his lap, while his hair began to wrap them up ever tighter. He tried to push to his feet, but the chair was bolted to the balcony, and his hair had already tangled up in its back. Even Ranma couldn't just tear his own hair out and get free like that.

"Aiyahh, I read enough manga know where this going, and Shampoo want no part of it!" she growled, also trying to get to her feet, but with her head and arms already tangled up with Ranma hair this proved very hard indeed. The fact several tendrils had curled around bikini top and were pulling it away from her did not make her any happier at the turn in circumstances. "What is this?!"

Grimacing, Ranma pulled one hand between their bodies and moved his hand up to his shirt pocket, opening it. Even as his hair continued to push and twist around them, Ranma let the whisker fall into his shirt pocket, closing it just as quickly once more with his teeth, his hand pinned against his lower chest by Shampoo as she was pulled tighter against him by the movement of his hair.

"Long story, let's just try to..." Ranma was interrupted by a crash from behind them as his hair, bunching up in every direction, broke through the glass behind them. In every direction it had expanded so much that it was now growing out and around the balcony the two of them had been sitting in. Indeed, it had grown so much that it was now gathering attention from people down on the beach and streets below.

"Crap!" Ranma grumbled, rocking in place, loosening the bolts with every move, while also pushing Shampoo off his lap, wincing as some of his hair was pulled out. *OH god, how long can it keep growing before I go bald!?*

But while she was able to get to her feet, once there, Shampoo found herself nearly buried in hair, which curled and poked and then continued on, pushing her further away from Ranma until her back smacked against the metal balcony, where it almost tied her in place. "Shampoo not comfortable with this!"

Ranma finally pulled the chair out of its bolts and stood up, still tied to the chair by his own hair as he turned, a wild thought occurring to him. *That soup was only supposed to be for bald men. And nothing happened until I turned back into my male form when I ate it... so...*

With that, Ranma waded through his hair into the hotel room, making slow headway as the hair had basically filled up the room from one end to another. And every step was also painful, tugging at his hair in a nasty way.

He still had it better than Shampoo though, who, pinned against the balcony could barely move now. Ranma's hair had grown so large that people below were shrieking and running away, with police sirens ringing out in the distance as news of some kind of hair monster spread.

But eventually, just as the police arrived and Shampoo's top was somehow almost torn off her body, Ranma reached the hotel's bathroom. There he dunked his head, and instantly 'her' hair stopped growing. Indeed, it turned floppy and lifeless, making everything easier.

Now that her hair wasn't going to fight her, Ranma grabbed at a pair of scissors from a woman's handbag, grimacing as she realized this meant this room had been in use, its users just not being there at present. Still Ranma was able to cut her hair off and turned heading back outside to find an irate Shampoo pulling hair off of her.

The glare she sent his way made Ranma quail, and the redhead grimaced. "Um, yeah, there are still a few things I've kept secret. Sorry, I just, uh, didn't expect that to come up."

"It certainly not what Shampoo want come up either. Shampoo think she need a drink. And Ranma be paying... and explaining," Shampoo grumbled, pulling large curls of hair out of her bikini top and bottom.

Nodding dolefully, Ranma agreed, and the two of them exited quickly, leaping from one balcony to another all the way around the hotel before jumping out into the city beyond as police raced up to the room they had used, moving too fast for their faces to be captured in the dozens of phone cameras going off from below. Once away from the scene of the chaos, Shampoo demanded they find a bar, and there she drank several more tasty concoctions as Ranma secured the Dragon's Whisker in her hair before changing back into his male body.

"Er, so I have to apologize again, for how this night ended, Shampoo. But it's getting a little late. I, er, don't think we should, *ahem* try again," Ranma finished, looking at the bar's clock.

"Shampoo agree, but Shampoo have problem," she went on, her tone somewhat embarrassed even as she stood up woozily, "Shampoo's legs now too-too wobbly trust to roof hopping. It look like Shampoo be, what the words, lightweight, yes?"

Given that Shampoo was barely able to stand, let alone move in a straight line, Ranma could only agree. But he simply shrugged philosophically, and a second later, Shampoo 'Eeped' as Ranma lifted her into her arms in the princess carry, giving her a very thorough kiss as he did... "Then I'll just have to carry you, won't I? Call it an apology for how tonight went."

Heading towards the hotel Mai had found for them, Ranma was about to hop down to the roads beneath, when he spotted the Shiranui heiress out on the patio of the room she'd rented, leaning back in a chair with a book in her hand. With a smile he moved in that direction,

and minutes later, Mai looked up from her reading as Ranma landed lightly on the railing to one side of her. She looked at them both with a grin, her eyes locking on Shampoo where she was still held in Ranma's arms. "Did you two have a good night?"

"Er, not really," Ranma answered sheepishly, looking down at a now-sleeping Shampoo. "Let's just say that night didn't end as either of us wanted. I take it Natsume and Kurumi are sleeping already?"

Deliberately shaking her head, Mai tried to banish feelings of jealousy which had risen within her at seeing Shampoo experiencing the princess carry, Mai reminded herself that the instant they got back to the Shiranui dojo she would be doing all she could to grab Andy's attention, and never let it go again. *There's no need for you to be jealous of Ranma and Shampoo, and certainly no need for you to make eyes at a man was already in a relationship.* "Nothing's wrong Ranma, just a stray thought. Anyways, yes, the two are already asleep. They shared a long shower and then conked out almost immediately. But what do you mean the night didn't go how you wanted it to?"

"We'll tell you about it in the morning. Right now, I need to set Shampoo down. We should probably head to bed too, if we want to be out of here quickly. I'll take the couch."

"No, I will take the couch," Mai argued back instantly.

"No way," Ranma snorted, being careful not to jostle the sleeping Shampoo. "No guy is going to let a girl sleep on the couch if he can help it. That is like one of the intrinsic rules of being a guy."

"Well, you can take that rule and you can introduce it to something called reality." Mai rejoined as she stood up, opening the door for Ranma, "You and Shampoo are together, and the other bed's already been taken by the two sisters. That leaves me as the odd person out so I will take the couch. It isn't as if it's a hardship Ranma, look at how soft it is."

"Well, in that case I suppose the rule can be waived," Ranma answered teasing a bit, and Mai laughed, shaking her head once more as the air and thought came to her that Ranma certainly had a slightly better sense of humor than Andy. *But he's nowhere near handsome! Right?*

She hadn't shaken off that question before Shampoo rejoined them, and she and Ranma bid Mai goodnight. When the door to the bedroom and its twin beds closed, Mai snuggled into the sofa, leaving the book she had been reading before out on the balcony, instead pulling her cell phone from her ki space. *The last thing I need right now is more tawdry romance.*

Indeed, she wanted to get her mind entirely away from romance at all just now, hoping that doing so would banish the series of comparisons she had just run through her mind. *Now, let's see what I can find online...*

At that point however, she sneezed onto her phone. *GACK, ooh, that was annoying. Someone must be talking about me. God, I hope it isn't Jubei or another pervert.*

OOOOOOO

Once he had woken up, Soun had decided to spend the rest of the day recovering. Not so much, admittedly, from the smack to his head, but to his ego. It was obvious now: he had really let himself go. What to do about it was a question, but one he set aside for now, bemoaning that once more, Ranma had turned away from duty and beaten him and Genma before running off.

It was only as night wound on that another thought occurred to him. *Oh my god, I can't believe this didn't occur to me before. The third girl, the one with long black hair and... well... admittedly she had a body that I would feel like pursuing even now, let alone when I was Ranma's age. Blast it, what if she travels with them? Another strong fighter, and another girl using her wiles to lead Ranma on.*

Shaking his head at that, Soun threw off his battered, bruised ego and concentrated once more on the here and now. Standing up, he silently slipped into and through the kitchen of the small café he had been sitting in. Before anyone could stop Soun, he was in and out into the alleyway beyond, leaping up onto a nearby rooftop. From there, he frowned, thinking. *Hmm... I can't get close to that strange martial arts school, even if, like Ranma, I could give myself the needed parts to be let in. Still, there's no way that Ranma would have mentioned his father's curse, so what would they have done with a panda? Ah... yes, the zoo.*

A quick search of Sado City found that the island didn't have a zoo large enough to keep an exhibit. Taking a ship over to Niigata was easy enough, the ferries ran twenty-four seven. From there, finding the zoos that had a panda exhibit only took a few minutes at an internet café.

Infiltrating the zoo was a problem. Not only were there numerous cameras, both obvious and not, around the place, but several animals noticed him the instant he leaped up over the outer wall. *Lucky for me the security men walk around with their flashlights on like that,* Soun mused as he watched the security guard pass by where he was perched in a tree in the giraffe exhibit.

Moments later, he was on the move once more, skirting the main walkways and staying in the deeper shadows. This wasn't easy, or quick, and by the time he was near the panda exhibit he was tired and somewhat cranky. But there, he spotted three pandas. Two of them were lazing about sleeping at night, while the last was eating some bamboo. *That must be my old friend, surely, he would choose to eat rather than sleep. Although how he can stomach that bamboo, even in his new form, I don't know.*

“Don’t worry Genma, I’ll have you out of there in a moment,” Soun whispered, moving over to the nearest portion of the outer cage to the eating panda. He paused however as he saw no sign of recognition and the panda size. It looked back in his direction for a second, then went back to eating, and Soun questioned his initial assumption. *Perhaps Genma was more tired than hungry for once. Hmm, is it a full moon?* “Genma?” he said in a slightly louder tone, still keeping to the shadows away from the security cameras he could see at each corner of the enclosure.

Neither of the sleeping pandas even bothered to wake up, and he grimaced a bit, before backing up slightly, then leaping up and over the outer cage, landing on the other side of a thin stream of water that marked the outer edge of the panda enclosure. And still the panda still slept on. Even the one eating didn’t bother to look up at him.

Even at his hungriest Genma would at least hold up a sign if I addressed him like that. And as for the sleeping pandas... the only ways to see if either of them is Genma involves waking them up in some fashion. I would really rather not. Fuzzy and cute or not, Soun knew that pandas were still large, dangerous beasts. *I will hold onto that idea for now.*

Soun moved silently towards the open doorway he saw leading into the inner area of the building at the back of the panda enclosure, a large square that connected to several other paddocks. When he reached it though Soun paused, staring at the camera above. *Damn it, of course they have at least a few cameras facing inward. Why can’t this be one of those small, underfunded zoos?*

Sighing, he muttered under his breath, “No help for it, I will need to take a chance. Genma better be thankful for this.” So saying, Soun pulled out a facemask from his ki space, putting it on his face just in case. He had to duck into hiding then as a guard came by. But, while hiding between a rock and a tree, he pulled out a small heater, and set it out to head an equally small baby cup, the kind with a top to it.

Moments after the guard was gone, Soun moved back to the doorway. Finding a nearby palm leaf, Soun tossed that up towards the camera, blocking its view and racing past before the palm leaf had a chance to fall back to earth.

Inside, there was another portion of the panda enclosure. This was mostly a bedding area, although there was another entrance that led further into the interior of the building. Steve supposed that was to allow access to various doctors, food and so forth.

On a bed near that door lay another panda, seemingly asleep. But once more, the respond to Steve’s words. Indeed, it didn’t even seem to be aware of its presence. And moving over, Gregory lifted one of the islands, seeing the rolled back expression within. The panda was also very hot to the touch, as if he was dealing with a fever. “Oh no, Genma, what have they done to you?”

Seeing nothing for it and hopping that fourth time was the charm, Soun held out the kiddy cup and poured it out onto the panda's head, nearly sagging in joy as it proved to be his old friend instantly.

At the familiar feeling of hot water hitting him and the change occurring, Genma roused a bit, shaking his head loosely, staring around him. "What, where, oh, I feel as if I went on a three-week bender!" He looked down at himself, his eyes widening at a certain shift below the belt. "What in the..."

Soun too was staring at Genma, although not his lower regions. Rather, he was staring at his friend's face, which was now very red, and very sweaty looking. *Is he sick, some kind of nasty flu... wait, no, he's a martial artist, none of us have ever gotten sick since we knew what ki was.* Shaking his head and deciding to set that mystery aside, and moved on to more important matters. IE, the fact a light had gone on over the door leading inward, a bright red light.

"I don't know what is going on here, Genma, but we need to get out of here." A second later, Soun could make out shouts and at least two voices. "Come on, we need to go!"

Whatever they had given Genma, it made him very unsteady on his feet. Steve had to help him for a few moments, as they moved back out into the public portion of the panda enclosure. There, the pandas had also roused themselves, hearing the shouts from within, as well as seeing lights coming racing towards them from other segments of the zoo.

That sight made Soun grimace, orienting himself towards the neatest "Genma I hope you're up to roof hopping!"

Genma grunted, but he was able to at least leap up high enough to grab the top of the fence. Grimacing, landing beside him, balancing on the fence, reaching down to help haul Genma's bulk upward. By the time Genma was halfway up, two security guards were shouting up at them.

Soun took a second to pat himself on the back for the mask on his face before he leaped down, engaging both men, knocking the tazer out of one's hand and blocking the club from the other. Both men went down easily, and then, Soun turned helping Genma to his feet where he had just tumbled over the fence. "Come on, we need to get out of here. And the city probably. Then we can go to ground and wait out whatever they've given you."

Genma on the other hand, even as he began to recover his senses further under the impetus the shouts from behind them, had to glance down at his front, shaking his head as he saw the movement underneath his gi. "What in the hell **did** they give me?"

Behind them, another pair of night watchmen stopped the panda enclosure. One continued after the pursuers, pushing down his shock at seeing people roof hop as his friend moved to help their down compatriots. asking one of them what had happened. That worthy

however was soon dealing with several disgruntled zookeepers. “Where the hell are they!? Where did they go with the panda!?”

“Panda? They didn’t seem to be carrying anything, and they came out this way, not through the building. Perhaps it was just a dare?” the security guard asked, backed by his groaning fellows.

“You must be blind! How the hell did they get past you carrying a panda?”

“How did they get into and out of the enclosure in the first place?” the guard shot back angrily, “and I didn’t see any panda!”

“Let’s just look at the security footage before we start shouting allegations,” another zookeeper soothed, getting between the other two men. “Although I will say, it’s a fact that we are missing a panda. The male one that we were hoping to breed with at least one of our own ladies. We even already doused him hoping to wake him up tonight.”

“Huh... maybe those two were some kind of diversion then,” the guard muttered, helping his fellows to their feet.

Moments later, all six men were staring at the screen, their eyes wide in shock. And the same zookeeper muttered, “Well, if that guy is married, he’s going to be making his wife very happy for a few days. We upped the dosage something fierce, hoping to overcome whatever drug Master Nawa gave the panda, at least twice the normal dosage for a panda that size let alone a human...”

“I need a drink,” said one of the security guards, an idea that the third, who despite his words was still very much in shock, had to fervently agree with.

OOOOOO

The next morning, Ranma roused himself out of bed with some difficulty. Shampoo was very clingy at night, and somehow, she always captured his arm, despite Ranma's mastery of the Saotome Sleep Defense technique. This was exacerbated thanks to her drunkenness from last night, and Ranma found himself blushing a bit as Shampoo lay sprawled out yet clinging to his arm and leg with all of her own. *Gah, it's like she's a weird cross between a slime and an octopus.*

However, Ranma in contrast was a really early riser, something he reflected on ruefully now as he shifted out from under Shampoo, shifting a series of the hotel pillows into his previous position. *I don't know if I come from it naturally, or my Pop's method of waking me up if I didn't. Or maybe it's just that I have too much energy for my own good. But I do like getting up in the morning. Besides, this way I can get my turn at cooking over with quickly.*

Whenever they could, while on the road, or camping out, Ranma and Shampoo switched off. Of course, during the toughness training that didn't really happen as much thanks to how sore they were. Regardless, Ranma had quickly learned that Shampoo was a much better cook than he was. He knew a few tricks about cooking over an open fire and a lot more about scrounging food, although he admitted Kurumi might be better at him than that, but in actual cooking skill, Shampoo had him beat badly.

However, during their time at Musubime Osoroshi, Ranma had learned that Mai was also an early riser. She had admitted once that, "It is **so** totally not by choice though. My grandfather and Jubei are both really strict about that kind of thing. And Andy is a morning person, you know, the kind that is always up and cheerful? It's actually kind of cute at times to see how happy he is just being up and about that early, especially when he forgets to do his hair. It does this whole curly thing and falls in front of his face in an ahoge that bounces like a puppy's tail."

At that point, Mai had segued into a conversation about Andy that had made Ranma a little uncomfortable, although Shampoo had giggled throughout it, egging her on for a time. But eventually Mai had finally returned to the previous topic. "And anyway, none of the three of them can cook. Whereas I'm actually quite proud of my cooking skills."

Indeed, the room Mai had rented for the group was an extended stay suite, complete with kitchen, which Mai had decided on the day before. She wanted to show off her cooking skills before they left the island.

So really, Ranma should not have been surprised to find her up and about, and indeed smiled as he opened the door to the bedroom, hearing her moving around before he saw her. But he was not prepared for the actual sight of Mai moving about the kitchen, humming something to herself. She was wearing a pair of sweat shorts, and a muscle T-shirt that reminded Ranma of one of his, nothing really provocative.

But like the bathing suit Shampoo had worn the evening before, the body underneath was so beautiful that it didn't matter. And when she turned slightly to the side to look at one of the pans, she gave Ranma an amazing view of side boob, which caused him to let out a loud, "ERK!" his face going red and pale as he quickly looked away.

Hearing this, Mai turned away from her work on breakfast, looking at him in some surprise as Ranma looked away. The fact that he was blushing while doing so actually fed her ego a little bit, as well as her mischievous nature and Mai picked up a small water gun, she had just filled a few moments ago with cold water. *Heh, I didn't think I'd get to use it so quickly.*

"I don't know what you're blushing for Ranma, after all... we're all girls here." As she spoke Mai aimed towards Ranma where he stood in the doorway to the suite's bedroom, firing quickly.

"Hey, wait!" Ranma grunted before the water struck him, full on in the face, turning Ranma into his female form. "Come on, girl! I've spent enough time in this form the last month."

Mai giggled, turning back to her food, although she was still blushing a bit. The way Ranma had stared at her for a moment had made her feel very good indeed, a marked contrast from Andy's blushing and running away. "If you're up, get over here and help me with breakfast. I'm nearly finished the steamed vegetables but I just started the tamagoyaki. So, if you could handle the fish that would be great."

Ranma nodded, figuring that was something she could do, and she moved to stand beside her, the two of them not speaking for a few moments as they work on the meal, before Ranma commented that she would take over cooking in the morning. "You and Shampoo can switch off for the other meals. I'll get my turn out of the way quickly."

"Actually, you probably won't have to cook at all if the girls decide to come with us. Natsume said that she would like to do her share. The girl is still under the impression that going into our debt is somehow dishonorable or something." Mai finished with an eye roll. "And from our conversation over dinner, I think she's got some skills anyway."

"Good to know," Ranma answered, smirking a little as he turned the fish on the grill. While he could cook to a certain degree, he didn't enjoy it.

The two of them talked quietly, wondering about what they should do once they reached Niigata and began their journey southward through the islands. Ranma was of the opinion that, with his father in the local zoo, Soun wouldn't be able to free him on his own, so they wouldn't need to worry about Weepy and Growly for a while. The guy hadn't shown any great skills of any type, let alone in sneaking around. With that in mind, setting up another camp like he and Shampoo had done in order to try and train their toughness might be a good idea. "Unless you think we should wait until we get back to your dojo?"

"Eh, while part of me says we should rush back, that's the part that wants to see Andy soon. But on the other hand, Jubei is certainly going to be there, and I really don't think we need to deal with his antics. Frankly, the last month has been something of a vacation for me from that kind of thing," Mai admitted, her expression showing how torn she was on that decision before it brightened as a thought occurred to her. "Maybe I can call Andy and have him meet us somewhere."

"That could work. And you're right, if that old pervert is going to be there, I doubt I would be able to concentrate on the toughness training, let alone the rest of what we might learn while sparring together, without the need to reap to Master Nawa's rules." The two of them shared fierce smirks for a moment before turning back to the food. "Punting the pervert would become a full-time past time. Not to mention we don't know how Natsume and Kurumi would react to him."

"I'd like to think that even Jubei wouldn't try to perv out on Kurumi considering her age and body type but who knows? What time do you think where we should leave?"

"Hah, it doesn't really matter, since we'll be swimming across to Niigata," Ranma answered firmly.

Mai looked at him sideways, one eyebrow rising in amusement. Ranma had taken the time after she had set the fish to cook to change back into his male body. "Are you still maintaining that you were able to swim across to Korea?"

"China. The first time my old man I made that trip we swam to Hong Kong. Why, think it's a little too tough for you to swim from here to Niigata?" Ranma taunted. "I thought you were all about proving that you could be as tough as any male martial artist."

May's eyes narrowed and she snorted. "Heh, you're going to eat those words when I outswim you."

"HAH! I'll believe it when I see it," Ranma retorted as the sound of the shower began.

The two of them continued to bicker in whispers to one another, taunting and teasing in the same manner they had gotten used to doing during their time at Musubime Osoroshi over the past month. If Shampoo had been there, she would've joined the conversation seamlessly, but she was still sleeping off the effects of drinking so much last night.

Instead of the purple-haired Amazon, it was Kurumi who appeared first. She banged the door open, causing a groan of pain from behind her, while she raced out into the main room, with a towel barely covering her. "Something smells good!"

"Kurumi, get back here! You can't run around just in a towel!" Natsume shouted, coming out after her sister, grabbing her by the shoulder. She stopped however, as she was also dressed in a towel, and now stared at Ranma, who was looking back over at the two of them, his eyes widening for the second time that morning at what he was seeing.

She squeaked, and hopped back into the bedroom, dragging Kurumi with her. "See what you did, Kurumi!? You can't forget that Ranma is a boy! You need more modesty."

The noise had woken up Shampoo, and she stumbled past the two sisters, ending giving a glare Kurumi's way before smiling tiredly at Ranma and Mai even as she quipped, "Ranma is only man half the time. Shampoo hopes Ranma have tea on?"

Ranma came over and actually handed her a cup of tea, then gently led Shampoo over to the sofa, where he placed a chilled wet towel on her forehead. "I've seen my old man do this a few times and it seems to help with his hangovers, so hopefully it will help with yours."

"Thank you, Airen," Shampoo said, while Mai made another mental tally next to Ranma's name, giggling to herself at how cute the two of them looked, the cuteness fighting off a small surge of jealousy. "But Shampoo already vowing not to do that again. Drinks last night too too tasty, but it not worth it. Even setting aside the whole monster hair tentacles thing."

"Monster hair thing?" Mai asked, looking over Ranma now, who blushed a bit and looked away. "Why do I think there's a story there?"

By the time Ranma was finished explaining that particular adventure, both girls were laughing, so much so that should Mai had trouble setting the table for them all. Natsume came out having changed into the same clothing she'd worn after Mai had bought her the evening before, deftly grabbing a plate as Mai nearly dropped it in her giggles.

She wordlessly gestured Mai into a seat, and quickly and efficiently laid out the meal, while Kurumi hopped in place at the table, holding her chopsticks in one hand, flicking them over her fingers, before clacking them together, eagerly staring down at the meal. "Hehehe, it all looks so good, I want to eat it all!"

"None of that!" Ranma interjected, pointing at her with his own chopsticks, a wry smile on his face. "The table is for eating, not martial arts contests. You and I can have a contest some other time to see who is the better Anything Goes Eater, but not with bystanders around."

Kurumi's eyes narrowed, and when she clacked her chopsticks together the next time, it almost sounded ominous. But she eventually nodded, and with her sister nudging her occasionally, her table manners were actually quite good, although Mai lamented that Kurumi was probably eating too quickly to actually taste what she was eating more than once.

"Ranma, when describing the Tendo Dojo, you concentrated more on the martial arts side of things and your issues with Akane then anything else. What can you tell us about her and our other sisters?" Natsume asked, her face set in a frown like she was fighting with herself. *And maybe this time he will go into greater detail about why he and Akane disliked each other so much.*

Oh, Natsume felt that Ranma was telling the truth, when it came to Soun's lack of skill, since Mai had also commented on it and Shampoo certainly didn't seem to have any great respect for him. But there was a part of her mind that was telling her that Ranma was the only source of information they had about the Tendos, which did not make her very happy. *Epecially since I can tell that he is not telling me everything about it.* Still, despite his roguish nature Ranma seemed an honorable sort, and she didn't think he would actually outright lie to her.

Ranma winced, then sighed, and went into greater detail on the trio of Tendo sisters he'd already met, starting by commenting again that Soun never hinted at the fact that he had two other daughters somewhere. Still, Natsume had dealt with that worry last night and

listened intently to his descriptions of her three unknown sisters or perhaps half-sisters. Legitimate or not, it didn't matter. *After all, the daughter of the concubine can still rise in prominence and displace the legal daughter if she is comely, or in this case, skilled enough,* she thought somewhat grimly.

While she listened as well, Kurumi stopped caring about anything else after Ranma said that Kasumi was perhaps the best cook he'd ever met. But Natsume listened to everything he said intently and became somewhat appalled, and when he finished, she put her thoughts on everything he had said succinctly. "So we have a wallflower of an older daughter, one who literally blends to the background and lets people walk all over her. The next is a would-be Yakuza who doesn't seem to care for anything beyond her own desires. And finally, the third is a brat who is trained just enough to make her dangerous, but nowhere near enough to make her skilled."

"Wow, tell us how you really feel," Shampoo and Mai drawled at the same time, before looking at one another and breaking out into giggles.

Natsume paused, one hand rising to her mouth, before shaking her head as Kurumi said, "Don't worry about Natsume. She's always a little bit crabby in the morning until she gets enough tea in her. But how long do you think it will take our Dad to try and catch up to you again?"

"Who knows? Honestly, it depends on how quickly he can get my old man out of the zoo," Ranma replied.

"You mentioned that before, yes." Natsume's lips twitched involuntarily, amused both at how blasé Ranma was about both his own curse and his father's. *I do not think I would ever be able to live with the curse as well as he seems to be. To say nothing of being able to carry on such a negative relationship with my father.*

That thought nearly caused Natsume to snort in an unladylike manner, but she kept it inside with some difficulty. Then again what am I talking about? I don't know my father at all, do I? The image Kurumi and I have built up off him in our minds has obviously not anything to do with the reality. I just have to hope that there is a reason for that. Just remember that martial arts manual Natsume. There has to be a reason for that, she thought, not for the first time since Ranma had begun to burst the sisters' picture of their father.

Aloud Natsume said, "Well then, you all mentioned something about the toughness training technique that requires you to have a lot of space. Although it pains me to say this, perhaps we should look into turning the need to set up such a camp into an ambush?"

Kurumi looked at her older sister in shock, while Ranma simply nodded, looking over at Mai who shrugged her shoulders. Shampoo agreed instantly. "The toughness training technique we are using is an Amazon one, and Shampoo is certain we need to follow what she remembers

exactly to get most benefit. And while we could probably figure out a way to toughen up segments of the body, this training is easily the best to toughen up the entire body at once. And setting up an ambush out in the woods for Growly and Weepy makes a lot of sense."

And it will get rid of them quicker. While Shampoo had generally speaking, taking Ranma's admonishments to start about jumping to conclusions, that didn't mean she wanted either of these girls around for long.

Kurumi protested at that point saying it would simply be easier for them to deal with the other three Tendo sisters but Ranma warned against it. "None of the three would be willing to admit that their father had a mistress on the side. Akane would probably just try to fight ya but Kasumi and Nabiki're wildcards. Personally, Kasumi would probably just bow and go along with things, but Nabiki is too tricky for me to predict. She could go from selling out your secrets, to paying people to attack you, to sending the law on you or whatever."

Ranma sighed, running his hand through his hair to his pigtail, very deliberately tapping the Dragon whisker as he looked over at Shampoo, who was looking at the whisker with some trepidation. Smirking at that, Ranma turned back to Natsume and Kurumi. "I don't want to head back to the Tendo place. If you want to, it's up to you. But I'm not going to get involved with that family again."

Part of this was simply because doing so would be just asking for trouble on many levels. That was pretty self-explanatory. But another part of it was the fact that he felt just a little bit guilty about how things that ended between him and Akane. As dysfunctional as they had been, they had been in a kind of relationship regardless. And Ranma had walked away arm-in-arm with another girl. *Even if Akane was the one who ended the relationship, she did have a real reason, having seen me and Shampoo kissing. I don't regret it ending, but that doesn't mean I want to be around her again.*

"I would rather like to learn the toughness training. As you mentioned after our fight, my toughness and strength needs to be raised tremendously before I am in the same league as you Ranma," Natsume mused.

"Preach to the choir sister," Mai muttered around a last bite of fish. While her style allowed her to fight Ranma and Shampoo on an equal footing, in terms of pure strength she was nowhere near Ranma, and both of the other martial artists were faster than her too. Or had been before she had devoted so much time at Musubime Osoroshi to training those basic abilities as well as learning the local style. By the end of that month, she had caught up to Shampoo in strength and speed, although Ranma still beat her in both categories. Indeed, she felt that he was even faster than Andy, although not as strong or anywhere near as durable.

"Oh, come on, sis! We can just deal with whatever trouble we run into at the Tendo Dojo!" Kurumi exclaimed. *I'm tired of being on the road, darn it! We are so close I can taste*

having a home almost like it's one of these tamagoyaki! "That would be way easier than this toughness training and waiting around for Dad to show up."

"And deal with the sneers, Akane at least attacking us whenever she can, this Yakuza-wannabe's schemes while our very presence wrecks our father's reputation without him being around to defend himself? We could do untold damage to the Tendo Dojo's local reputation if the two of us and the three of them fail to get along." Natsume slowly shook her head. "No, without our father there to vouch for us, all we have is the training manual, and the written promise that we can take over the dojo. The first would probably make us look like thieves. The second like charlatans unless these three daughters would recognize his handwriting?"

Ranma shrugged ignorance at that, and then gestured to the two sisters, indicating whatever was going to happen would be their choice. The two of them turned to one another, leaning in and having a quiet conversation as the original trio cleaned up and got ready to leave. They'd head to the shore before changing into their swimsuits and swimming across to Niigata.

Eventually, the two sisters finished their conversation. They would continue traveling with Ranma for now. Both of them wanted to confront their father before bearding their sisters in the Tendo household. Kurumi was a little bit more resigned than eager for this but figured it would be better to meet their father and either be welcome, or force him to welcome them, into his household rather than eventually having him return and try to turf them out.

On the other hand, Natsume was certain that everything could be fixed if they could simply talk to the man. Hopefully he would prove to have hidden depths or recognize them. But if not, he would still give them the answers both sisters desperately sought after so long.

Soon they were at the ocean, and Ranma changed into his female form with the help of a bottle of water before entering one of the changing rooms. He was out first, wearing a two-piece similar to the one Shampoo had been wearing the night before, although the bottoms were boy pants rather than a regular bikini bottom.

Natsume and Kurumi were out almost as quick and came out wearing somewhat subdued swimsuits. Natsume wore a full-body white swimsuit modeled after a racing swimsuit, which accentuated her curves without putting any of her actual body on display. Although judging by the looks she was getting from a few of the men around, the elegant, subdued beauty look certainly worked for her. Kurumi in contrast wore what Ranma thought of as a beginner's level two-piece swimsuit. Her top looked somewhat like Ranma's own, but with frills at the top and bottom, and the bottom also had several frills that made it look like a skirt rather than a swimsuit.

Instantly, Kurumi raced off to grab some food from nearby street vendors. Yet in contrast to the night before, Natsume didn't bother going after her. Instead she stood beside Ranma, asking the redhead further questions about his style and answering some in turn.

In this, Ranma astonished Natsume and how much of her style he (currently she) had been able to analyze during their fight. Ranma seemed to have a flair for adaptation and more and more she was looking forward to training with him (currently her). *It will no doubt be painful but it will certainly be interesting.*

Shampoo calling out, "Airen come here for a second," interrupted them, and Ranma moved over to the changing booth sheet entered a moment before. Natsume watched the redhead go in but made no efforts to follow.

This was a good thing, because Shampoo wasn't asking Ranma to come over to help her with something. She poked her head out from the side of the curtain, smiling prettily at him. "I decided I wanted to make up for wrecking our date last night with the whole Dragon Whisker thing."

Ranma made to open her mouth to protest that she didn't have to, that it was Ranma's fault, or maybe her old man's for making him so hungry she, at the time he, just ate a stranger's soup without asking. But her voice cut out into a long, "IIEEEEEE..wwwwoooo.... when Shampoo removed the curtain and Ranma's higher brain functions all ceased function at once.

Her girlfriend was not wearing the same bathing suit Shampoo had worn the day before. Instead, she wore what Ranma had heard called a V-type swimsuit. This was basically a series of straps going from one shoulder down to her crotch, barely covering her nipples and further private parts down below. Frankly, it looked as if someone had attempted to take the same amount of cloth from a pair of shorts and tried to cover the bare minimum of what could be covered.

And since the body underneath was Shampoo's, that made the impact even greater.

She knew it too, and giggled at her expression, slowly turning around, showing Ranma her rear, where a single strip went up her spine splitting to go over her shoulders while below it only covered her crack rather than her cheeks. She then twisted to the side so Ranma could see the vast amount of side boob available before turning back, and showing the equally massive amount of cleavage, if such a thing it could be called given how little was actually covered, from the front again.

Shampoo then leaned over from the waist, wiggling a bit to set her breasts to swaying. *They might not sway as much as Mai's, but they are certainly still doing the job! She thought with satisfaction.* "Airen see something she likes?"

If Ranma had been in his male body, he would be dealing with a certain public indecency issue at the moment, and not just the blood starting to drip from her nose. Now even in his female form, Ranma's arousal could be seen in the form of tiny little knobs showing up on her swimsuit top, while she was very thankful that she was wearing the same boy bottoms from the night before down below.

Seeing that Ranma was completely unable to articulate a verbal reply, Shampoo giggled and reached out, flicking her jaw upward with a single finger, hearing the bones of her jaw actually click back into place. "Shampoo think that if Airen is a good boy he can see Shampoo in this swimsuit again," she said, her accent once more coming to the fore as she delighted at Ranma's response.

"Oh, are we all showing off now? If I had known that I would've tried out my other swimsuit," Mai interjected, coming out of her own changing booth next to Shampoos.

Ranma was almost afraid to turn her head in Mai's direction, so near sensory overload was she already as blood continued to drip from her nose. But to her surprised relief, Mai's swimsuit was actually quite tame. It was a one-piece swimsuit, something like Natsume's in general shape, although where Natsume's was blue, Mai's was her habitual colors of red with white highlights. But unlike Natsume's, which covered everything, Mai's had a square cut out of the chest area to show a great deal of décolletage. But in comparison to Shampoo, it was nothing special.

Somehow, Ranma's expression must have shown her surprise, and Mai chuckled. "Like Shampoo, I bought two swimsuits. One to show off, and one to actually swim in. The one to show off is somewhat like Shampoo's here in coverage, and I can only hope that Andy reacts much the same way you did." She looked over at Shampoo and held out her hand for a high five which the Amazon girl returned, before stepping back into her changing booth, singing something under her breath.

It was kind of catchy, Ranma reflected, even as she smacked her cheeks, trying to pull her body to calm down by concentrating on the sound. "Yap pa pa, yap pa pa." something or other.

This was helped by Natsume's comment of, "I am uncertain which is a greater pervert. Ranma for coming up with that Strip Fist of his, or Shampoo for wearing something like that in public, no matter how briefly."

"Oy! Again, with the disrespect to your senpai!" Ranma shot back. "Drop and give me fifty, and just be glad I'm not sitting on your back while you do it."

Natsume chuckled at that, but made no effort to obey, sensing Ranma was joking about that aspect, although not so much the second bit. "Is that something your father actually did to you?"

"Heck yes. He did that when I was nine years old, I think. By the time I was eleven, he'd graduated to sitting on a sofa perched on my back. By the time I was twelve, it was while I was running from wolves," Ranma answered, her tone almost blasé despite the topic.

Natsume and the just returned Kurumi both stared at her, but seeing the serious look and Ranma's eyes, paled dramatically. "Jeez, and I thought just living on the road was harsh," Kurumi muttered.

"Eh, my old man's basic tenants for training were: nothing is impossible, and everything can be training," Ranma laughed, shaking her head. "It's amazing what ya can do when ya don't know it's impossible."

"I trust that the training you offered the two of us won't be that is insane?" Natsume inquired, or rather demanded, reaching behind her for the tennis racket container there that held her carpet beater. She had bought a new one after dinner the night before, just as Kurumi had a new ribbon. The original had been shredded by Ranma in his and Natsume's fight, much like Natsume's carpet beater.

"Nope. The toughness training will be hard and painful, but my personal training of you two won't be that bad. Probably. Now, let's swim over mankind," Ranma answered, turning away and moving towards the ocean.

On her back, the redhead was carrying the waterproof bag. It had been ki-expanded and thus was able to handle all of their clothing and such without adding to its weight at all.

"Wait, that's what we're doing?" Natsume exclaimed.

Her younger sister though looked interested and raced after Ranma, shouting out, "I bet I swim faster than you do."

"That sounds like a challenge," Mai quipped, hurrying after them, picking Natsume's arm in her own as Shampoo hurriedly came out of the changing area, grumbling and carrying her second swimsuit with a pout.

Soon, all of them were lined up on the shore on a rock sticking out of the beach into deeper water. There, Ranma explained a few things to Natsume and Kurumi, specifically where they were going and how they could meet up again if they lost sight of one another in the water. Ranma and Shampoo had both explored Niigata well enough they knew several of its landmarks, and picking one out, an aquarium near the beach, to use as a meeting point was easy. It was a big building, and had lots of signs, so it would be hard to miss.

While Natsume was astonished at the idea of swimming over to the main island, she didn't disparage it off the bat. The distance did concern her a bit, not for herself but for Kurumi. Kurumi was actually a little bit faster than Natsume, but she was nowhere near as strong, and she lacked endurance.

However, Natsume knew how to motivate Kurumi to go beyond her normal physical limits. "Last person there has to pay for a meal at an all-you-can-eat restaurant?" she proposed,

causing Kurumi to squeal in delight and Mai to flinch. She had become used to Ranma's appetite over the past month, but Kurumi, although Ranma probably would be astonished to hear it, actually ate more than he did.

Still, with the Anything Goes users all nodding agreeably to the wager, she and Shampoo were forced into it as well. As martial artists, backing down from a challenge like that was an extremely difficult mental exercise, even for Mai, who liked to think of herself as saner than her new friends.

Looking around, Ranma noticed a group of men had been moving in their direction, and called out to them. "Hey, can one of you call the time? We're going to have a little race."

"Sure babe, anything you want," the man answered, happy that the redhead had addressed him and his friends. "Although, if it's a race, shouldn't you leave the backpack behind?"

With an eyeroll, Ranma laughed, smirking competitively over at Natsume and the others. "Nah, the water dragging against it will make it a little more fair."

"If you think you will get us angry enough to burn ourselves out, you have another thing coming," Mai snorted, causing Kurumi and Natsume to blink, both of them having gotten a bit riled up at Ranma's words.

Natsume blinked, then her eyes narrowed as she remembered a comment Ranma had made yesterday. *Didn't Ranma call it Anything Goes Smack Talk, or something? Ugh. It seems that the Aerial Style school really takes that Anything Goes idea further than my sister and I have.*

"Let's just go!" Kurumi exclaimed, getting over her irritation and keeping her eyes on the prize, hopping in place in eagerness. *I can already taste that lovely, lovely food!*

The five girls lined up alongside one another facing out towards the direction the ferries were coming, although they were well outside the normal shipping lane here on the beach. When they were all in position, Ranma looked over at the guy who she had shouted at a moment ago.

He took his cue, raising his hand and shouting, "Ready, get set, go!"

With that, all of them dove into the water. Several seconds passed before they emerged one after another depending on how long they could hold their breath. Arms and legs churned the water almost like propellers as the five martial artists raced away. Within minutes, they were out of sight, with Ranma in the lead, Mai and Kurumi behind him, Natsume and Shampoo hot on Natsume's heels.

For several moments, the crowd that had watched them stared after the five martial artists, until one of them began to point out the obvious. "Hey, uh, they're not coming back in."

A nearby lifeguard stared out at the five of them, and then sighed and set aside his binoculars. They were already too far out of sight for him to shout at them, and really, what would be the point? *Even the youngest was swimming faster than I can, dammit!*

OOOOOO

It turned out that while Shampoo and the two sisters were good swimmers, none of them had speed and strength of Ranma. He left all of them in the dust, eager to not pay for that all-you-can-eat meal just as much as all of them were. However, he found himself being pushed to push even further to stay in the lead because it turned out that Mai could swim almost as good as a both dolphin in the water.

The two of them exchanged the lead position several times, before slightly slowing down as the initial rush left their bodies. About an hour later, they started to see the shoreline ahead of them and slowed down still further, letting the others catch up.

"So, what's the real reason why you want those two around? I can tell you like them well enough, but I don't think you like them enough to bring them along on your training journey with Shampoo. That kind of ruins the atmosphere you know?" she teased, keeping her head above water for now and doing the breaststroke so that she could actually carry on a conversation. "And I can tell that you don't really think that they are Soun's daughters."

Ranma did the same, moving a little closer to her so that they didn't have to shout so much to be heard over the sound of the ocean around them. "I... Don't really think so, no. Soun's not really the type, I mean he is... kind of... devoted to his girls?" Even as he spoke those words, Ranma's tone made it clear she wasn't all that certain. "Er, he's like a limp noodle given human form, but he takes care of the girls. Doesn't really care about the happiness much, or else he wouldn't have sprung me and the whole marriage agreement on them but... Yeah, it's really hard to say if he is the type to have another woman on the side. Like I told the two of them, he was supposedly different before his wife died, but I don't know if that would translate to having a mistress on the side."

Ranma became serious for a moment, shaking his head. "It's obvious they have learned Anything Goes, and it was from a man. Unless it was somehow that Happosai that Master Nawa mentioned, and I can't see that as being possible since I've never heard of the guy. So, it's either Weepy or Growly, and of the two, it sounds way more like something Genma might have done."

That sobered Mai up, and she slowly nodded. "AH, yes. From what you've told us about him, Genma is much more likely person to have... Loved and run so to speak. I'm sorry Ranma, I didn't realize that."

"Yeah... I don't wanna think about it, but I hafta think it's possible. Although how he was able to hide the fact, he was training two other kids when I was around I don't know, but then again, my memories of that time of my life's kind of vague anyway. Too many concussions," Ranma explained bluntly.

Still, Mai could tell he was very uncomfortable with what he was suggesting and decided to try and help him. "For my part, I'm rather skeptical of either of them being related to you or to Soun. The timing would imply a long-term affair, and something like that is very hard to hide, especially when you're living on the road as you were. Unless you had a concussion every time you noticed your father leaving for weeks on end, I doubt that he could hide it from you" Mai caught Ranma looking at her in confusion through the waves, and she chuckled. "The girls' ages, Ranma. Natsume is a little older than you are, while Kurumi is younger, fourteen to your seventeen. That means that Soun or your father was in a long-term relationship with their mother."

"Huh, you know, I hadn't thought of that," Ranma admitted. "I still don't know if Soun is the type in the first place, but that's definitely a mark against their story isn't it. Both for him and for my Pops too. I don't think even my Pops would have left me for weeks on end as you put it."

"It certainly is, and don't worry. As long as Shampoo or I are around, you'll have someone here who can spot the forest for the trees," Mai taunted as she started to feel the ocean floor rising up beneath them towards the beach.

Her taunt however drew Ranma's ire, and she ate a splash to the face for her troubles. The two of them immediately got into a splash fight, which continued on until they were almost to the shore, standing up and splashing one another with grins on their faces. The past month had been near nonstop training, which was fine, but having fun like this was important too.

At the same time, Ranma had trouble keeping her attention off of Mai's body. Despite the semi-conservative cut of her swimsuit, it still showed off her body to incredible effect. The way her breasts heaved with each dodge or attack was also just incredible to watch.

But Ranma wasn't the only one nearly mesmerized. The sight of the two gorgeous girls splashing one another drew attention from a lot of people around them. And the place the two of them had come ashore was a segment of the local beach known for more adult oriented fun than family style. There were several hundred men and women Ranma's age and older here, without a single kid in sight.

As such, the two girls were almost instantly approached by a large group of heavily tanned young men. Despite none of them having tattoos or wearing gold chains, these were much same sort that Ranma and Shampoo had been preying on ever since they'd left Nerima. "Hey babes, you two here to see the sights? We could show you around you know?"

A glance between the girls followed as one of the men gave that one liner. A plan was quickly made, and the two of them moved off, heading behind some rocks with a group of seven of them, ostensibly heading back to their hotel. Loud smacks and a shriek quickly cutoff followed, and the two girls left the rocks alone a moments later, with Mai counting out the money they'd taken, while Ranma rifled through their wallets further.

"Not a bad haul. I think we might actually be able to pay for Kurumi's all-you-can-eat restaurant today without my needing to break out my credit card," Mai chortled. "And, oh my word was that fun!" she nearly squealed, hopping in place. "I am so joining you and Shampoo when you go out to do this again."

Ranma nodded at that, and raised her hands in the air waving her arms as she spotted Shampoos violet colored hair against the backdrop of the ocean. Soon the three slower girls joined them, with Kurumi whooping in delight at Mai and Ranma's statement that they would still be going for an all-you-can-eat restaurant and that she and her sister wouldn't have to pay for it. A quick change, and Ranma was back in his male body, and the others had changed back into the normal clothing. Leaving the beach behind, Ranma led them deeper into Niigata, heading to one restaurant that the master of martial arts construction had told him told about.

However, halfway there, the five young martial artists began to be followed. And not by Soun and Genma this time. The two fathers had escaped by train elsewhere, wishing to go to ground to let whatever was in Genma's system have time to work its way through. Instead, they were being followed by two young men.

None of the five young martial artists noticed their two shadows for a while, and headed to the all-you-can-eat restaurant in good cheer, as Ranma put forth his plan for the day. How he got to be the leader of this group no one could quite figure out, but it was true that Ranma had several good ideas, and the first one he put forth was a very interesting one. "So, Shampoo and I know the city somewhat well, and outside of the Martial Arts Construction school, there really isn't what I would call a true martial arts dojo here. But even the stupidly commercial or fake dojos understand the rules of the Dojo Challenge. So long as none of you object to beating up on weaklings for a day, we can probably gather a lot of supplies for ourselves."

"While my sister and I have done this kind of thing before, you seem to be talking about doing so in a more systematic manner than we have used in the past. Normally we would just ask to be put up for the night, or for food for a few days," Natsume mused looking at Ranma speculatively. "That is, if we didn't want to just humiliate them for reasons of rudeness."

"We've done that a time or two," Kurumi snickered. "You know the kind of dojos that are more gang hangouts? Or claim to have their own style of martial arts and alllll those fake trophies? I hate those."

"Heh, well, while food is good, we could also gather money, supplies for our eventual camp, and specifically, sleeping bags for the two of you," Ranma answered seriously despite

Kurumi's good humor. "Mai said that you too showed her what you all had in the way of sleeping bags, and she thought they were... what were your words Mai, when we were cooking?"

Mai snorted. "Either fit for a museum or rags, one of the two. Certainly not up to actually continuing to be of use. And Ranma's right, you could challenge a dojo, demand that they hand over any sleeping bags they have, or go with you to purchase two. Sleeping bags aren't that expensive, so it's well, within the limits of a normal forfeit."

"I'm always amused by how Ranma takes the idea of living off the land in new and interesting directions," Shampoo murmured, smacking her shoulder against her Airen's as they continued down the street. "You two could get clothing that way too."

"I don't know, all of that sounds a little too duplicitous..." Natsume murmured. "Or perhaps piratical?"

"Piratical is probably closer to what you mean, but that doesn't mean it's wrong. Think about it. Taking away a dojo's sign means you negatively impact their livelihood for either the short-term or a very long time, depending on if you beat their master in front of his students and how fast rumor spreads. No one wants to go to a dojo whose master loses to someone less than half their age, after all," Mai said, before going into the economics of everything for a few moments. It was very clear to the others that she understood the economic side of running a dojo better than anyone else there, particularly Ranma, who had very deliberately turned his attention to looking around them, rather than listening to that portion of the conversation.

By the end of Mai's small lecture however, Natsume was convinced that demanding more in the way of monetary penalty was not a bad idea, nor was it too dishonorable. Kurumi was looking forward to it, giggling almost maniacally to herself under her breath, unaware that as she did so, nearly every dojo master throughout the city shivered as if someone had just walked over their graves.

When Mai finished speaking, Shampoo and Ranma spoke up about the number of things they would want to gather as well. Ranma would need a lot of building materials, which he no longer had on hand, having gone through all of the stuff they had gathered in their first attempt to learn the toughness technique. Nails and, ironically rope would be necessary, above and beyond a few cutting tools. The only rope they had on them was Ranma's Rope dart and Mai's manriki, which unlike most was a thick rope rather than chain weapon.

And while Shampoo and Ranma still had a lot of camping equipment, Mai would need some on her own, although she professed to wanting to buy some other things as well. "Toiletries, some small things like that, and I think we might also want to grab some entertainment for ourselves," Mai mused. "I've also wanted to buy a laptop for myself."

"What's a laptop?" Ranma and Shampoo asked, startling both of the sisters and Mai.

"Seriously? Even my sister and I know what laptops are. They're little computers that you can travel with," Kurumi scoffed.

Ranma made a moue of distaste, while Shampoo just shrugged, pointing to herself. "What part about being an Amazon from a small village in the back of China's beyond was vague?" she asked, quite pleased with herself that her accent hadn't come out, and she apparently used all the appropriate words there judging by everyone's non-reaction.

"You have an excuse, your Luddite boyfriend doesn't," Natsume retorted, snickering, before looking at Mai in confusion. "But even so, a laptop really wouldn't help us much out of the woods, would it? Even if laptops are portable, they don't have very good battery life. Barely a few hours from what I know." *And how I have gone from worrying about where our next meal would come from to worrying about how long a laptop would last away from civilization is beyond me.*

"Yes, but there are also portable solar panel-based charging systems that you can use to charge them," Ranma said, causing Mai to look at him in surprise, an obvious question forming on her face and he rolled his eyes. "Just because I'm not interested in computers or anything like that, doesn't mean I don't know about camping equipment. Believe me, my old man and I looked into that kind of thing when we realized how dependent we would be on being able to heat water up."

He then pointed at Natsume and Kurumi. "And that's one thing I wanta learn from the two of you, those temperature- based techniques of yours. Even if you just deal with cold, I can probably reverse that and create a heating technique."

"I find that agreeable enough, although I will warn you that those techniques do take quite a bit out of you if you're not prepared. Manipulating the temperature itself is difficult, as is pushing it out of your body, although obviously you seem to have figured out at least the first stage of that. And don't look to learn how to create enough cold or heat to truly hurt someone. Shock or chill someone, cover them in frost, yes. Chill someone enough to make them unable to fight back, no," Natsume answered coolly.

Ranma grumbled a bit, remembering his issues with on that score, while Mai simply smiled, a little smugly. Her fire manipulation and Bunshin techniques were examples of pushing ki out of the body and manipulating the nature of it. But both of them came from the more 'mystic' side of things as her school thought of it. There was a mental and spiritual bent to ki manipulation like that which Ranma didn't seem quite able to grasp. *Not that he's alone in that. Andy and even his brother can't do the things I can.*

They had talked about the nature of ki numerous times over the past month. Indeed, they'd had lively debates on the subject. Ranma felt ki was simply life energy, coming from the body and the earth around them. But Mai had been taught that there was a connection between the soul and ki, something Ranma had never heard of before, and thus didn't really

believe in. But Mai felt that he was coming around to her opinion, as was Shampoo, who lamented the fact she hadn't been taught much of anything about ki before chasing after 'Ranko,' Ranma's female form.

By that point the group had arrived at the all-you-can-eat restaurant, and Kurumi and Ranma turned their attention to more important things, letting the three older girls dominate the discussion throughout the meal. Afterward, the five of them split up, although not along what had been the heretofore natural lines, Mai going off on her own to find a laptop for herself, along with a sleeping bag and other things. The others split up in terms of the kind of supplies they would be gathering as the two sisters didn't know the ki space technique, although Ranma felt it wouldn't take them long to understand it given their background in ki manipulation.

Shampoo and Natsume would start to hit up various dojo's gathering food supplies and sleeping bags for the two sisters. The two of them and Mai had agreed to handle everything cooking related while in the wilds. Indeed, a kind of competition had sprung up between the three of them as they talked over the meal to see which of them was the better cook.

Ranma and Kurumi would be doing the same but would use the money for construction equipment and the charging station for Mai's laptop. And if the dojo master had a daughter her age, some clothing for Kurumi or Natsume, who still only had three sets of clothing each, despite Mai's attempt to get them to buy more at WEGO the day before. Ranma would be also adding to the two sisters camping gear in general, looking for waterproof and warm things. While it was still summertime, it was never too early to plan ahead.

While Mai, Shampoo and Natsume walked off along the road, Ranma instantly took to the rooftops, leaping up to the top of the restaurant, gesturing Kurumi to join him, which she did with alacrity. "Come on kiddo, there's a dojo a few blocks this way. You can take the first few, and I'll step in when it comes time to start haggling for the forfeit."

"That sounds like you're going to make me to all the work. Not that I'm complaining, but I thought you would be looking forward to sparring with these dojo masters," Kurumi answered, frowning in some confusion. That didn't seem much like Ranma in her mind.

"Eh, beating up on weaklings has never really appealed to me on its own. It is funny bursting their egos, showing them what real martial artists are like, but not all that much. Besides, this way I can start some of your instruction. And if you do a good enough job, I will teach you the dreaded art of Mooch Fu. Provided we find suitable targets..." Ranma trailed off musingly looking back over their shoulder for a moment before shaking his head, having thought he had seen a flash of movement but not seeing anything now. "Your target zone is going to be a lot smaller than your sisters for that kind of thing, unfortunately."

OOOOOO

The two shadows the group had unknowingly gained since entering the city proper watched the five of them split off, and the younger one commented to the older, "They've split up brother mine, should we do the same do you think?"

The older youth scratched at his chin thoughtfully. "No. I'll follow one group, the two girls, I think. The guy they met up with, and I'm still wondering where he came from, or where the short stack redhead went, seemed to almost notice you just then when you stuck your head out. You head back and tell the others we've found the Gluttonous Sisters."

"Why not follow the single girl around?"

"Because we're not interested in her of course," came the blithe replied. "I mean she's sexy and all, and I wouldn't mind getting her number afterwards, but it is Natsume and Kurumi of Anything Goes that we're interested in." He smirked suddenly. "Besides, Natsume's as good-looking as ever, and that girl with her, the one with the purple hair is really exotic."

This caused the younger man to sweatdrop. "Why do I get the impression you're making this decision more from your hormones than any other reason?"

"Doesn't make it invalid though. Now get going, I need to catch up before they get too far away."

Rolling his eyes, the younger of the two obeyed, dropping down to an alleyway below as his older brother went racing across the rooftops.

OOOOOO

It was pushing evening by the time the five martial artists met up once more, using the aquarium they had earlier in the day as a meeting point. Seeing the backpack on Mai's and on Shampoo's backs, which they must have bought, Ranma held up a hand and all of them exchanged a group high five, with even Natsume giggling a little at how well the day had gone. "I see everyone had a great haul? I know Kurumi and I did."

Kurumi was too busy licking at her ice cream to add much to that, simply giving everyone a thumbs up.

"While the actual fighting was as lackluster as I feared, I have to admit that taking the long-term view in terms of what we can acquire from the dojo master's penalty is something that never occurred to me before. Something I am now kicking myself about," Natsume said shaking her head looking at the ice cream cone in her sister's hand with some amusement.

"And I got the laptop and everything else I needed, although I doubt I had nearly as much fun as you four did," Mai said with a snort. "I even made a list of things I thought we might need, so let's go for it now."

While Ranma mock-groaned at the idea of needing to be so organized, all the girls were amenable to it, even Kurumi. With Ranma trailing behind them, the quartet chattered happily, ticking off things on Mai's list as they moved off away from the aquarium, walking along the ocean side for a bit taking in the sights, and generally heading out of the city.

However, before the last of the outskirts of the city were behind, Ranma called out something that stopped the conversation and the girls turned to him in some confusion. "Are you two just going to follow us all day? Or are you going to actually come out and do something?"

Shampoo and Natsume both looked confused, but turned around, facing in different directions, waiting for trouble, while Kurumi just looked confused. Mai on the other hand almost instantly spotted a flash of movement up on the rooftops above and cursed herself for her inattention. *I am a Shiranui-style fighter, I should have more situational awareness than that.*

"See, I told you he spotted us," said a voice, as two men hopped down from a nearby rooftop. "No point in just following them along anymore."

Looking at them, it was very clear, they were brothers. Indeed, they resembled one another more than Kurumi and Natsume did. Their faces were similarly formed, although the older one had a slightly broader, flatter chin and had his hair dyed red and done up in spike, while the other one had a bowl cut in black. They both wore the same kind of martial arts uniform, long pants loose at the bottom, the top of the uniform being sleeveless, with wide necklines, coupled with feet and hands tied up by boxing tape. One of them wore a uniform of black and red, the other white and green. Ranma thought the older guy was in his mid-twenties, and only looked a year older than the younger man in the bowl cut.

"Agreed. I suppose it's time to challenge them openly then." The younger man in white and green answered, staring not at Ranma or Shampoo surprisingly, but at Kurumi, while his older brother was staring at Natsume. "Gentle people, we are not here for all of you. We have bones to pick with Kurumi and Natsume, the Gluttonous Sisters of Anything Goes!"

"Hmm...." Kurumi hummed, scratching her chin thoughtfully. "You two look familiar, but I can't place where I've seen you before. What is your problem with me and my sister?"

"I'm afraid I can't place them at all, so whatever we did, must not have been all that important," Natsume drawled, stepping to one side as she momentarily analyzed the two fighters, wondering if she should break out her carpet beater. Kurumi had already undone her new ribbon from around her arm, slowly twirling it behind one leg hidden from the two young men who had so accosted them.

"You can't even remember me! I'm Kim Dong Hwan! I asked you out on a date, and not only did you not show up despite leading me on, but while I was out waiting for you, you and

your sister tag team my father for our dojo sign!" The one in the black and red outfit shouted. "I have followed you ever since to bring you to justice and end of the deprivations of the Anything Goes School! Our father told us about the dishonorable nature of your Grand Master, and there have been stories of a Genma Saotome carrying on in similar manner for more than a decade now."

Natsume cocked her head, then shook it slowly. "I don't remember anything like that. I remember being hit on occasionally, but I never agreed to go out with anyone, nothing beyond the occasional ice cream trip anyway." *Although I'm happy that there have not been any rumors about our father acting in a dishonorable manner. And if there are such rumors about this Genma character, it explains easily how Ranma has grown up to be such a rogue... although given the name they gave Kurumi and I, perhaps I should not throw stones.*

For some reason, that set Kurumi to giggling, while Ranma smirked and Shampoo snorted. But this didn't seem to go over well with Dong Hwan, who looked like he was about to lose his top. Indeed, steam almost seemed to be coming out of his ears.

Before he could explode however, his younger brother stepped forward. "And for my part, you defeated me in a fight after I tried to stop you from stealing food from street vendors, Kurumi of Anything Goes! Then, not only did you beat me, but you left a note on my person saying that I would be willing to pay them back! Your dishonorable actions have brought you to this day! I, Kim Jae Hoon will defeat you and bring back our dojo sign at the same time."

To any normal person, those would've sounded as incredibly petty reasons to hold a grudge. For martial artists, this was just par for the course. And as practitioners of Anything Goes, Natsume and Kurumi were not about to back down from the challenge. "Very well, I accept your challenge," Natsume answered, striding forward, her carpet beater in hand now.

Ranma looked at the other two girls, scratching at his head. "I've never been on the sidelines. Are we supposed to just stand around and watch?"

"I suppose so. They don't seem to have a problem with either of you two, let alone me." Mai pondered for a moment, then shrugged. "Yeah, I think all we can do is watch if it is a formal challenge. To pull a joke out of Kurumi's book, do either of you have any popcorn?"

Ranma scowled, not liking this at all. He wanted to be the one to be challenged, damn it! *Both of these guys look decently tough too.* Ranma pondered how their father, who might be stronger than them, had been beaten by Natsume and Kurumi. *Although didn't Natsume mention having combined attacks or something? And I suppose if they could keep the range open and just spam that kind of thing at him, it would be very tough to beat if he couldn't just break through like I did.*

"Shampoo that is, I am wondering why two Koreans are doing here in Japan. And apparently have a dojo as well somewhere," Shampoo wondered aloud. "If you run into any

Chinese martial artists, I'm going to laugh. Internally however, she was wondering, *Is it something to do with the Anything Goes School that all of their students are trouble magnets or troublemakers?*

However, their comments had garnered some reaction from actual artists. At which point, Dong Hwan made a very bad move. "Don't interfere outsiders, this is between the two of us and the two of them. If not..." Dong Hwan whistled, and from out between various buildings came three score young men dressed in a similar manner to the first two.

As one, the newcomers roared, "We will avenge our dojo, we will avenge our stolen food! Down with Anything Goes!"

"Oh, well, there goes that idea," Shampoo snickered, her chui appearing in her hands from her pockets.

"Now we can get involved, right?" Ranma asked eagerly, cracking his knuckles.

Mai whipped out two fans, making them dance in her hands as she stepped forward, wishing she had dressed in her normal combat outfit rather than the jeans and shirts she was currently wearing. Not having my boob window is going to limit my effectiveness at range, drat it. Although at least I have my manriki in there too... "Especially since they seem to be making this a matter of the Anything Goes School in general as well as Natsume and Kurumi's depredations. Who knew that you are such a heartbreaker Natsume?"

"Ugh, please! While he might have flirted with me, I certainly can't remember the event, and if I had ¥1000 for every person who's tried to flirt with me or otherwise try to take advantage of me, I could afford an apartment and stop traveling all the time," Natsume scoffed, while Ranma tossed his bag to the side, joining Shampoo and Mai's, who had already done the same when the two men made themselves known.

"Strangers, or fellow students will only stop you from interfering, please stay back." Jae Hoon said, trying to deescalate now that it looked as if his brothers high-handed threat had instead dragged Natsume and Kurumi's companions into things when otherwise it seemed as if they had been willing to stand aside.

But now with a means of joining in the fun, Ranma had no intention of backing off. Instead, he escalated things. "My name is Ranma Saotome of the Anything Goes Aerial Style. And for the honor of Anything Goes, as senior student I will accept your challenges." He paused then, before adding conscientiously, "for the honor of the school. My Pop's honor is his own issue entirely. Any agreements Genma's made, any deals, or anything he's done he has to answer for. Even if he tried to make them in my name." *No more marriage agreements for this guy!*

That last bit seemed to confuse some of the group slowly spreading out to come at the Anything Goes martial artists and their companions from every angle, while Natsume looked at Ranma angrily. "I saw you play that senior student card! Don't you dare think that you can get away with that kind of thing often."

"OH, let me have it this once. I haven't had any kind of fight today, beyond that one-sided beat down Mai and I had on the beach," Ranma protested, then seeing Natsume's mulish expression, held up a hand in a fist. "We can play Jan Ken Pon for it?"

While Dong Hwan and Jae Hoon gaped and Jae Hoon attempted again to calm things down, all four of Ranma's companions nodded at that, even Mai. She was also kind of bored, not having had even the one-sided contests that the others had going to the dojo's today. She understood the necessity, and was greatly looking forward to enjoying her laptop, but still. "Excuse us a moment," she said politely to the crowd, actually bowing from the waist towards them with her hands clasped in front of her waist, before turning back to the others.

A small Jan Ken Pon tournament began, with Ranma and Kurumi winning out as the crowd of martial artists around them got angrier and angrier. By the time they were done, and Ranma and Kurumi moved off to face off against a fuming Dong Hwan and somewhat bemused Jae Hoon, the rest of their followers were ready to spit nails at how blasé the group of five had been about the threat they represented.

"Don't look at me like that Natsume. Your ki techniques are made for crowd clearance. Show off a bit," Ranma quipped, even as he charged forward towards Dong Hwan.

"Do not think you will get away with being so high-handed all the time Ranma!" Natsume grumbled. She really wasn't as competitive as Ranma seemed to be outside of her goal of being heiress to the Tendo Style, but she was very certain in her prerogatives, and felt that Ranma was definitely abusing his so-called 'senior student' status to foist off the rabble on her.

With that in mind, she was the first one to actually taking offensive move, before even Kurumi and Ranma had closed the distance to the two leaders of the group facing them. "Wind Slash!"

The air-based pressure attacks lashed out, smashing into people and slicing into their clothing, although they didn't even bruise the skin underneath, simply blasting the people they struck off their feet and hurling them into their fellows or up into the air. However, several in the crowd could actually dodge them, not many, but enough to close, where Mai and Shampoo met them.

Mai kept her own distance, shouting out, "Kunai Bunshin!" hurling her weapons forward, before closing. And unlike Shampoo and Ranma, her opponents couldn't tell the

illusion from the real ones, and her attack succeeded in further scattering the impromptu circle the crowd tried to create around the fivesome.

Shampoo on the other hand simply charged forward, her two chui in hand. Soon loud clangs reverberated as she struck out, blocking blows or smashing into the bodies of her opponents, sending them stumbling or flying through the air just as much is Natsume's technique.

But she noticed immediately that these young men were quite well-trained. Not up to her standards or Ranma's certainly, but much better than the normal cannon fodder that they had dealt with when they prayed on various gangs in the past few months.

They used Taekwondo, a Korean style of martial arts and were extremely agile and flexible, lashing out with kicks that could go from anywhere from her leg up to Shampoo's head. They also worked together. A group of six kept her in one position, circling. When she leaped or charged in one direction, the students in that direction fell back, doing their best to dodge around her strikes as their fellows closed.

Meanwhile, the rest continued to try and envelope Natsume and Mai. While Mai moved to meet them, Natsume continued to keep her distance, using her carpet beater to lash out in every other direction that wasn't already been covered by her two companions. In this manner, they kept the majority away, but it was a close-run thing, since all the Taekwondo users could dodge insanely well. Still more of them were being flung about than closing, and it was clear to Natsume they would win this aspect of the fight.

Meanwhile, Dong Hwan, Jae Hoon, Ranma and Kurumi closed with one another. Kurumi was the first to lash out, flinging her ribbon ahead of her towards Jae Hoon. He ducked under it, then wrapped his arm around it as it whipped back in her direction, tugging hard.

Kurumi grimaced, but let the weapon go, watching as Jae Hoon wrapped it around his arm as she charged into hand-to-hand range. Jae Hoon struck first, lashing out with a kick that nearly caught her in the head, so fast and accurate was it, despite her last-minute dodge to the side. She was forced to hastily ducked under it, and still got clipped on the top of her head, sending her stumbling. But Kurumi turned this into a roll forward, and lashed out with her own kick at Jae Hoon, who leaped upwards, flipping in the air several times.

Landing, he then lunged forward in a slide kick propelling himself forward so fast she had trouble dodging. And then the two were off, dodging around one another, only occasionally landing a strike that had to be blocked as both of them concentrated almost entirely on dodging for the most part.

Ranma disdained his rope dart for the moment, wishing to see what Dong Hwan could do. Closing, he leaped up, tapping gently down on the kick that Dong Hwan had sent his way, lashing out with his own, which was blocked.

Even so, the strike sent Dong Hwan stumbling a bit and wringing out the arm he had used to block the strike, as he stared at where Ranma had just flipped several times in midair to land on top of a lamp post above them. "Dammit, why can't you just let us fight those two? This has nothing to do with you!"

"I'm bored, and you made this about the Anything Goes School in general," Ranma replied honestly, then launched himself downward like a rocket, easily twisting around the high kick that Dong Hwan had sent his way, blocking and redirecting the punch that came after, noting absently that Dong Hwan didn't seem quick to shift his single attacks into combinations. Ranma's own strike cracked into the side of Dong Hwan's head, sending him stumbling sideways, but he turned that into a roundhouse kick, faster than his previous attacks. This nearly caught Ranma despite his being in midair and he used the momentum of it to stay there. A series of punches and kicks flashed towards Dong Hwan head, forcing him to duck and dodge, no longer willing to simply try to block.

However, Dong Hwan wasn't just trying to play defensive. Instead, he was summoning up his own ki attack. The next time Ranma landed a hit, Dong Hwan stumbled and nearly bit his tongue at the strike to his jaw, but it was Ranma who hissed in pain as electrical currents flowed through him from the touch.

Using the momentum of his own strike, Ranma pushed off and away, landing lightly on Dong Hwan's foot as he once more went for a high kick trying to catch Ranma in midair. Feeling the same electrical current running through him again before flipping himself away several times to land twenty feet away from Dong Hwan, scowling a bit. "Okay, that's interesting. Why the hell is it that everyone else seems to be able to create these element attacks and I haven't figured out my own yet?"

Dong Hwan scoffed at that and took a stance. One palm went forward in the shape of a claw, the other one coming back beside his head, as his entire body became lined with lightning. "Kim Style Taekwondo Secret Art: Electric Scales!"

Elsewhere on the battlefield, Kurumi was stumbling back and away from Jae Hoon, who had exhibited a similar attack, although in his case, his feet and hands were now covered in fire as he attacked, lashing out in a series of combinations, smoothly transitioning from one to another as he bounced around the place, using slide kicks and acrobatics to try and throw Kurumi off her game. While he wasn't quite as fast as Kurumi, he was easily stronger than her, and just as agile. He bounced off the walls the rooftop and a few parked cars, attacking and pushing Kurumi away from the others, until Mai noticed her plight.

Smacking aside one of the other students, she whipped her fan into the pivot leg of the next, dumping him onto the ground before smashing her fan into his side, sending him skittering forward across the ground like a soccer ball to crash into several others. This paved the way for her to rush forward. Using her fans, she lashed out with it to either side as she

moved in Jae Hoon's direction. Reaching Kurumi, she tapped her lightly on the shoulder with one of her fans even as Mai twirled around, her fans opening as she did so. "Tag in Kurumi."

Before Kurumi could protest, Mai was between Kurumi and Jae Hoon, and her twirl had finished. One of her fans came close enough that Jae Hoon stupidly batted it aside with one of his fiery hands, even as he moved in for a kick. "Shiranui Style, Flame Control!" *I can't just control fire I create, I control all fire around me, foolish one.*

All around Mai a wind picked up, grabbing at the fire created by Jae Hoon twisting it into wide wall of fire which she then sent directly into them, causing Jae Hoon to cry out in pain, rolling away as his own fire was blasted back into his body, burning his clothing and scorching his skin in a few places.

He rolled with it, putting the fire out quickly even as it dissipated around Mai. Coming to one knee he launched himself in another one of those fast slides, swiftly segueing into a series of kicks and punches, but Mai blocked them all. "All we wanted was a martial arts match with the Gluttonous Sisters, why are you interfering?!"

"Because it looked like fun," Mai replied honestly, not having a particular horse in this race beyond that, growling a little as a nifty palm strike smashed her fan out of her hand. Dropping her other one, Mai pulled her Manriki out of her pocket, twirling it around like a flail for a second, but then pulling it back in before Jae Hoon could take advantage.

The next second one of the weights cracked down on Jae Hoon's ankle, causing him to grimace, even as he flipped himself up into another, and then brought his arms and elbows into the fight, trying to get into Mai's guards. But Mai used the manriki on the defensive, which was how she had originally envisioned using the weapon when Master Nawa gave it to her.

She caught Jae Hoon's outstretched fist with the rope segment for just a second, and then her foot grabbed the fan she had dropped. Much like the others Mai was wearing sandals. She flung her fan up, where the metal fan smacked into the underside of Jae Hoon's chin sending his head back and causing him to see stars. A kick to his stomach doubled him over, but he wrenched his arm out of her grip, turning into a roundhouse kick.

But unlike Kurumi and Ranma, Mai ducked under the kick and her manriki's weight smacked into the side of his knee, causing it to buckle. An elbow strike to the stomach followed by a punch to the side of the head, and Mai was then twirling around him, locking in a hold with her manriki around his neck and tossing him headfirst into the ground with punishing force.

He grunted under the impact, but to Mai's surprise, was able to push himself off with the ground, rolling away to try and get some distance.

But Mai wasn't about to let that happen. She leaped after him with both feet forward, landing so hard next to the man that she cratered the ground underneath. Her manriki blocked

his next kick, sending it to the side, and then, as he tried to lash out with another kick, it was her turn to get in under his guard. Another elbow strike to his arm right behind his own elbow deadened the limb, followed by one to the upper chest which caused him to gasped in pain and stumble back.

Jae Hoon tried to use his fire technique again, but Mai's manriki crashed into the side of his face, the strike transmitting enough force to knock him sideways into a wall, which shattered upon impact. He was so out of it he couldn't recover, and he stumbled away right into a whirling kick from Mai, which caught him on the side of the head in the same place, finally knocking him entirely unconscious.

Shaking her head, Mai moved away, leaving him there and noticing idly that Shampoo, Kurumi and Natsume had mostly finished off the others. Shampoo was looking a little bruised. The opponent's abilities to dodge around her so much, and the surprising angles they could achieve with their kicks without having much in the way of tells had thrown her a bit. Natsume on the other hand was looking entirely unruffled, having kept her distance the entire flight.

Meanwhile, Ranma and Dong Hwan had been dancing around one another, although Ranma was looking much the worse for ware, his fingers and even hands twitching, while he wasn't moving with any of his normal grace. But while his own Aura fist needed work, Ranma's ki healing was fantastic, healing the minor damage done by the electricity around Dong Hwan's body. It was pulling up though, and Ranma had to put more effort into dodging than attacking.

Ranma didn't want to break out the aura fist just yet. Watching Dong Hwan in action, Ranma felt as if he was on the cusp of understanding something about ki, something that he had not quite understood just yet. He was willing to take a few electrical shots to figure it out, since otherwise, Dong Hwan really wasn't much of a threat. He was strong, probably as strong as Ranma was, although not up to Ryoga's level, and seemed really durable as well, although not up to the level of someone like Honda. He was also adapting to Ranma's style of aerial combat far faster than most opponents.

But in sheer speed Ranma outmatched him, and that was without using the Amaguriken technique, so he could only land a blow once out of every ten times. That meant his durability and strength were almost completely negated. *And he's slowing down too. I can tell. His endurance can't match mine.*

Watching as Dong Hwan charged forward again, lashing out with a series of kicks, Ranma dodged around or redirected the kicks while he remained in midair, bouncing off of a wall nearby, then up onto a lamppost, as his body shuddered so bad, he nearly fell. Dong Hwan, followed, but before he could press his advantage, Ranma flipped around the lamppost and went even higher.

Dong Hwan followed, his landing cratering the rooftop, the electrical current fizzling and sizzling around him as he did.

The two of them bounced back and forth across several rooftops around the rest of the group as they finished up, something that Dong Hwan noticed with a scowl. "Well fuck, this didn't go anywhere near the way we wanted it to. But at least I can kick your ass!"

"That's how it goes sometimes," Ranma said commiserating somewhat, even as he tried to land a kick on Dong Hwan's face. "We ain't gonna kill any of ya or anything else, so I'd say take it as a learning experience. As for kicking my ass, there's this old saying about counting and chickens ya might want to look up."

Dong Hwan dodged to the side and lashed out with a frontal kick that went even higher as he bounced up off of the ground to do it, but Ranma blocked the kick and landed one of his own into Dong Hwan's chest. This sent him back to the earth, but caused Ranma to gasp in pain from the electricity. Rolling with the hit, Dong Hwan charged forward's again, fists flying along with his high kicks, for the first time moving into a full combination attack as she too took to the air, bouncing off the ground occasionally. "Electric Style: Flying Storm!"

Ranma matched him, still concentrating on dodging trying to figure out how Dong Hwan was holding the aura of electricity around his body.

Several more of his enemy's blows landed before Ranma finally understood. *I, I've been too forceful! I've been trying to **force** my aura out of my body, and to control it when it appears. Like I'm, like I'm trying to force an ocean's worth of water through a dam. Instead, I should allow it through slowly, let it out throughout the entire body. It isn't like reinforcing your strength or speed with ki, that would be keeping the water in the dam to keep using that image, you want it to rise just to the surface...*

More blows landed now, but Ranma still avoided more than hit even as he concentrated on this idea, reaching into the ki reserves within. *Work with it, don't force it, don't be a closed dam wanting to open all at once...* While his mental words were not quite matching the reality, they and the imagery helped Ranma concentrate enough to finally get his ki under control.

When next Dong Hwan kicked him, he gasped in astonishment, as suddenly Ranma was no longer taking damage from his electrical aura. Instead, the electricity seems to stop about an inch away from Ranma's clothing. From the grimace on Ranma's face, whatever he was doing was kind of hard, but it certainly stopped Dong Hwan's electricity based ki techniques flat.

It wasn't easy, but Ranma was able to do it, and when next Dong Hwan landed a strike, Ranma simply stood there, taking it. Dong Hwan's blow landed straight on Ranma's chest, and bounced off as if it had struck steel, electricity and all. He whirled into another kick, but Ranma matched it with a punch, hitting Dong Hwan's leg behind the knee, causing him to grimace in pain.

Then Ranma was in his face, smiling at him even as his fist lashed out at nearly Amaguriken speed. "Thanks, you gave me the final clue I needed to figure out what I was doing wrong. Aura Fist!"

Ranma's punch took Dong Hwan in the chest and created so much force that it blew Dong Hwan off his feet and off the rooftop entirely. The hit shredded his shirt somewhat, but not the rest of his clothing. Instead, the entire impact had been pushed into Dong Hwan's body, blasting him away just as it had done to Natsume but without any of the side effects.

Watching Dong Hwan fall off the roof, Ranma gasped, going to one knee and shaking his head. "Even when I'm able to... I can't say control it, kind of refine it, maybe? It still takes a lot out of me."

Mai landed next to him, with Shampoo following on her heels. "You all right there Ranma? And did you just figure out how to do a battle aura of some kind watching someone else use one? You're going to have to teach me that trick you know," Mai said.

On her heels Shampoo exclaimed "Airen amazing! Every time I see you, I'm more and more certain I made the right choice."

Understanding what the Amazon meant by that, Ranma smirked and gave Shampoo a quick kiss on the lips as he stood up, putting an arm around her shoulders and nodding to Mai, feeling more tired than he really should be. "You teach me about what you've been calling the spiritual side of ki, and all teach you about what I just did." *Although I think I'm still just barely scratching the surface. This whole idea of using Wuxia stories as a basis seems to be paying off, but there's a lot more I can do with it. And we all need to work on enlarging our ki reserves.*

The three of them hopped down to the road, where Natsume and Kurumi, under an earlier order from Mai were gathering up the martial artists who had attacked them. Instead of letting them where they lay, the sisters were transporting them two or three at a time up onto a nearby rooftop, where the Taekwondo users would hopefully be out of sight.

Carrying Dong Hwan Ranma soon joined them, although Dong Hwan groaned as he was set down next to his brother who was still unconscious from the beating Mai had given him. The older Kim sibling opened one eye blearily to stare at Ranma. "Hack, ugh, an, and I thought I learn quick."

Ranma grunted, looking at him with a nod, and then pulling out a chilled bottle of Diet Coke from his ki space, causing Dong Hwan's eyes to widened in surprise even as Ranma set it on his chest, the semi frozen drink serving as an ice pack on the man's black and blue chest. "Yeah well, I think I was close to a breakthrough before you showed up. Fighting you just helped me make that last bit of a leap you know? You fought well, though."

Dong Hwan snorted at that, shaking his head. "Yeah, because that's why you and the others were able to school our entire dojo."

"Like I said before, take it as a learning experience. And work on your speed. Your strength is up to par with me, and I think you're even more durable than I am. It was just that my speed let me dodge a hell of a lot more strikes that landed," Ranma said, his tone almost analytical, before he cocked an eyebrow at Dong Hwan, trying hard not to show how battered he was feeling right now. "And I don't want the two of you or the rest of you lug nuts coming after any of us or Natsume and Kurumi alone. They beat your dojo once, whoopee. Now your anger at them has caused you lot to be smacked down again. Get over it."

Dong Hwan grumbled, but nodded agreement, and Ranma left him there with a few other now-frozen drinks from his ki space.

With that, the five of them raced away from the scene of the battle, as in the distance, police sirens could be heard. *Funny as it is to think about it, that's one thing I never had to worry about in Nerima. There the police never bothered to show up for anything martial arts related.*

Shaking off his amusement at that observation, Ranma looked at his companions, and gestured them on. "Come on, I want us to be out of Niigata before it gets dark."

OOOOOO

It took more than three days before whatever was in Genma's system had at last run its course, and he was fit to be out and about in polite society once more, although the hotel's cleaning people would probably be cursing him for days. And he had certainly paid for more in the way of porn than any single customer the hotel had ever had, something Genma was very embarrassed about. *But I couldn't have found any local whores, not without Soun knowing and I know he's a prude about that kind of thing. Why I've never understood, it's the only thing women are good for. Still, I just have to be thankful we had enough money to pay for two rooms,* the misogynist thought.

Soon after leaving his room for the first time in days, Genma found Soun in the lounge area, carefully husbanding a drink of sake. He greeted his friend with a nod, and the question of, "So, should we get on the trail of your wayward son instantly? I've been looking around the city, and I've heard and read news articles about a martial artist fight, which Ranma was undoubtedly involved in and I think know the general direction he left the city and at least. But we are running low on supplies and funds."

"Agreed. Will have to deal with the supply issue first. Let's go make some money, and then we can head out after the brat and that Amazon hussy of his. Were you able to figure out what the deal with the other girl was?" Genma inquired, sneering a bit as he mentioned the second girl.

"Not exactly. She's not a local from Sado or here in Niigata. But they have been joined by two other girls. One of them is quite young, but the other one apparently is the same age as the Amazon hussy and your boy. Your son seems to be quite the playboy, leaving my dear Akane for all these hussies."

Soun looked as if he was about to cry again about the dishonor done to his family, but he stopped, regaining some measure of control. This caused Genma to reflect that as annoying and painful as this trip had been, it seemed to at least start the process of giving Soun a spine again.

After a moment Soun had his tear ducts batted down and went on once more. "They, your boy and the Amazon hussy went around town challenging the various dojo's and taking their forfeit in either direct cash or supplies of various types. They left a trail we can follow, but no one seems to know anything about the two of them or what caused the massive fight."

"Well, perhaps we can get some information once we're on the way. For now, let's concentrate on our own needs first," Genma answered, a response that would have surprised absolutely no one who knew the martial artist turned occasional panda.

Soun nodded, and the two of them headed towards the door, not knowing that this time, Ranma and his companions would be waiting for them from the start...

End Chapter