

Hey guys, sorry this is coming out so last minute, ya know? I got into a bike, the real instead of motorized kind, accident last Tuesday. Nothing permanent, but my chest and face got bruised something fierce. Well, at least I look rather funny with my face all bruised and puffy apparently. Regardless, concentrating through the pain has not been pleasant. Still, I am generally happy with this.

I have also made the decision to bring back **ATP** next month. Let's get 'er done, folks! I will be posting the small story poll (in which **Stallion** will return) tomorrow, but will have the patron only poll up tonight. The revamped version of the last chapter of ATP will be posted momentarily. Morde24 tried his best, but he couldn't quite get it back to me in time, alas.

This has been edited by Hiryo, who helped me with naming conventions, gave me his opinion on several points, and helped me get some of the flow issues right.

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."

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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!"

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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 to 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 there 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 despite her best efforts to seem put upon.

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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 thumping 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 ta 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.

"Hmmf, 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?*

OOOOOO

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 wozzily, "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 kiddie 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 than 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. *Especially 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, "IIEeeeeee..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 the 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 Shampoo's 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 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, bar 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."

OOOOOOO

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.

OOOOOOO

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."

OOOOOOO

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 battened 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

Ehh, this isn't where I wanted to end things, I wanted to carry things into the toughness training. But like I said, pain is hard to concentrate through. And I wrote a lime which, after consultation with Hiryo, I shifted to the Hairy Incident. I also realized if I did end it where I wanted to, it would end in a cliffhanger...

Still, it was a lot of fun, and I figured that, with the wider world of KoF and Street Fighter merging into the Ranma-verse, that having characters from the other two fandoms show up was a good idea.

