Stop!! Ranma-kun!

by Beedok

Summary

Genma Saotome is notorious for two things: getting Ranma engaged, and questionable finances. Promising Ranma to a Yakuza family to escape his debt seemed like a good idea, but that incident in China that leaves his son sometimes looking like a daughter might spoil his plans. Little does he know that Oozora already have an issue with their dear Hibari that will further complicate things.

Notes

Legality Blurb: I don't own Stop!! Hibari-Kun! or Ranma ½. They both belong to their respective authors & anime studios.

Other notes: Some of the more surreal elements of Stop!! Hibari-Kun! will be toned down to make it more compatible with Ranma ½. Only a little though, it's not like Ranma ½ is founded in realism. Both stories are set in Nerima, so it's easy to get all the best odd balls to show up.

Warning, that with it being set in the mid-to-late 1980s things aren't exactly... PC for dialogue at times. (Though I'll not be including much in the ways of slurs... mostly for my own comfort as an author.)

A few characters who don't seem to have names will be given names (recurring background students specifically). Should I be incorrect at any point, and those characters have canon names that I missed... let me know.
The sign outside the large traditional Japanese residence read simply "Kanto Yakuza: Oozora Clan."
Inside, the sturdily built and middle aged mustachioed yakuza boss, Ibari Oozora, relaxed in his teal kimono and sorted through the mail the gorilla-like Seiji had handed him, when a postcard mixed in caught his eye. 'Bringing Ranma from China, as per our agreement. Be in Nerima soon. -Saotome Genma' it read.

"So, the day is here at last," he muttered, stroking his large chin. "Well, I should gather the girls then and give them the good news."

With that he was on his feet to search for his daughters. Gentle humming from the kitchen confirmed Tsugumi was where he'd expected her. His eldest, with her long dark hair and calm face, was hard at work preparing dinner.

"Tsugumi, family meeting," he said with a smile.

"Oh?" the long haired 19 year old daughter of the Oozora family replied. "Just let me turn the stove off."

A few moments later the Oozara father found his second daughter, Tsubame, in her room, finishing up some homework. Since it was her last year of high school, she was very focused on her marks.

"Tsubame, family meeting," he told her.

"Huh? Oh, sure," the girl with brown hair just past her shoulders replied, setting her pencil down to head to the living room. "Wait, family business stuff or normal family stuff?"

"Um, a bit of both?" he replied with a shrug.

Her face held an apprehensive expression, but she headed towards the living room nonetheless. As she wandered down her father was counting on his fingers.

"Hm, Suzume is probably a bit too young, but I'm not certain of that Ranma boy's age," the man muttered to himself, "It was a twelve year training trip, so he can't be less than twelve. Thirteen or fourteen isn't too big a gap, and husbands are usually a little older."

With that he nodded confidently and began to search for his youngest daughter. After a few failed ideas he eventually found the little blue haired girl giving Seiji another lecture of some sort. The man might be the size of a gorilla, but he was a very soft and gentle soul (at least when it came to children) and constantly tried to please the rambunctious ten year old.

"Suzume, there's a family meeting," Oozora told the girl softly.

"Really?" she replied, her stern expression shifting to joy as she turned to her father. "And I'm invited? Yay!"

The little girl ran off, displaying some of her boundless energy. Ibari followed her more calmly and was happy to see the three girls waiting patiently for him as he entered the room. Sitting across from the three he smiled and cleared his throat.

"I have important news," the yakuza boss began. "I have received word from an old... associate regarding an agreement made some twelve years ago. The man, Saotome Genma, is set to return
"Hey!" a beautiful 15 year old blonde shouted, storming into the room. "What's the big idea? Starting a family meeting without me? Am I, or am I not your child too?"

"I, er, well," Oozora stumbled, trying to provide an explanation, before managing to build a cohesive response, "I suppose this does affect you slightly Hibari... As I was saying, Saotome Genma, an exceptional martial artist I have had the pleasure of hiring on a few occasions, is set to return from his training expedition to China and should be arriving today."

"China? That's a long way to go," Tsubame noted.

Ibari nodded and continued. "Yes, indeed. He's bringing his son with him. As agreed twelve years ago, his son has gone through extensive training to be at the very least his father's equal. In exchange for my forgiving a significant debt, this son, Saotome Ranma, shall become a member of the Oozora family."

"Oh, you're adopting him?" Tsugumi asked.

"Oh hahahaha. No... He'll be marrying one of you, my lovely daughters," Ibari replied.

"What?" Tsubame shouted. "Dad? You really promised to hand one of us over in marriage?!"

"Er, well," the father struggled. "It's more that he is being handed over than the reverse."

"He'd better be handsome at least," Tsubame fumed.

"How old is he?" Tsugumi asked.

"I agree with Tsubame, I hope he's cute," Hibari chimed in.

"Um, well, I... I've not actually met him, so I can't tell you," Oozora said.

After each of the four children gave him deadly stares, Tsugumi was the first to speak.

"Honestly... how irresponsible can you get?"

"You get carried away in your schemes too easily dad!" Tsubame added.

"You're... you're such an... an idiot!" Suzume shouted.

"I guess we just have to keep our fingers crossed," Hibari said with a sigh.

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Elsewhere a panda was chasing a small rehaired teen through the rainy streets of Nerima. To readers of Ranma ½ fanfiction this scene should come as no surprise, though the specific neighbourhood of Nerima was not Furinkan-cho. For the one reader here due to their love of Stop! Hibari-kun! who lacks familiarity with the other half of this crossover, well... a panda was chasing a redheaded teen through the rainy streets of Nerima, not too far from Wakaba High. The panda lunged for the teen, just barely missing as the human combatant leapt in the air.

"Cut. That. Out!" the teen shouted in a high-pitched voice.

That response was punctuated by a kick to the panda's head. A small crowd began to form and one or two people made comments about animal cruelty. The panda and teen both adopted fighting
stances and began to lash out at one another with remarkable skill.

"This whole arrangement sucks! Not only are you picking a fiancée for me, but you're tying me to yakuz!"]

A few more blows were exchanged, the panda proving remarkably agile for such a large creature. Meanwhile, one or two crowd members in the know nodded sagely, realising the Oozora clan were somehow mixed up in all this. The Oozoras were always involved in something strange and a kung-fu panda seemed to fit their general madness.

A powerful flip slammed the panda into a stop sign, seemingly winding the creature.

"I don't care what you think, old man, I'm goin' back to China."

The small redhead turned around and walked away confidently, slinging their pack over a shoulder. The panda meanwhile rose to its feet, picked up the stop sign, and slammed its human foe over the head, knocking the teen unconscious. The crowd muttered apprehensively as the panda hauled the smaller figure onto its shoulder and wandered off.

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A commotion in the greeting area distracted the Oozora children from yelling at their father.

"Hey, w'az all this?" the door guard was yelling.

"Leggo a me ya ol' fool," a higher pitched voice was shouting.

The Oozoras were hurrying towards the entrance when a massive panda pushed forward. Ibari and his children retreated a bit.

"You're scarin' 'em ya big oaf!" the redhead shouted.

"Is-is this your associate, dad?" Tsubame hissed to her father, pointing at the panda.

The yakuza boss was simply clutching at his chest nervously, trying to calm himself down. He didn't need to see the white crocodiles tonight on top of dealing with a panda. The panda meanwhile set the small teen down in front of them and seemed to calm itself. This helped Ibari regain his composure a bit.

"Are you, by chance, Saotome Ranma?" the curly haired father asked.

"Yeah," the teen said reluctantly, "Sorry 'bout this."

"Excellent," he said, leaning to give his future son-in-law a hug.

"Bit of a pretty boy," Tsubame remarked judgmentally.

Ibari, however, realised there was something softer than usual about the boy he was hugging. A second squeeze confirmed that wasn't quite right and he released the youth, staring down nervously. The Oozora children had their eyes drawn down to the same spot (well, in Suzume's case it was more just straight ahead). Tsubame leaned forward and poked Ranma in the chest.

"'He'... is a girl," she replied flatly. "Amazing work dad."

Hibari reached forward to confirm and was swatted off by Ranma. "I don't need everyone checkin' that."
The yakuza boss was now completely overcome, collapsing and clutching his chest. The gorilla-like Seiji and the professionally slick Suba came rushing out with medication, while Ranma stood there in shock. After a quick injection of some unknown medication the Oozora father seemed stabilised. He was carried off to the living room and allowed to lie down with a cold towel on his forehead, while Tsugumi, Suba, and Seiji all tried to nurse him back to health.

"Good work on the engagement plan; seems like basic knowledge to know if your friend's kid is a boy or a girl," Tsubame grumbled.

Suzume was distracted by the large fluffy panda. Though she was slightly nervous, she really wanted to play with the fuzzy creature. The panda seemed to at least humour her. That or rightly feared her wrath. For such a small girl she was surprisingly intimidating when she wanted to be.

"Well, as much as I was hoping for a cute boy, a new girl to befriend is fine too," Hibari said, "Let's be friends."

Ranma looked over at the stunning blonde with those bright blue eyes and blushed slightly, "Sure-sure, yeah, friends sounds good."

"So, you are still a really good martial artist, right?" Hibari asked.

"Oh yeah, the best!" the redhead replied, cold blue eyes suddenly filling with warmth.

"Cool; I'd like to see some of your moves. Maybe we could spar too. I do a bit of martial arts myself," Hibari smiled.

"Spar?" Ranma replied, following the blonde out a door. "I... I don't usually fight girls."

Tsubame let out a snicker, which confused Ranma. Deciding to ignore it, the redhead followed the blonde, slightly hypnotized by the swaying hips and feminine skipping of Hibari. They soon reached the dojo, and Ranma moved to the middle of the room while Hibari sat to watch. The pig-tailed redhead began moving through a number of complex kata's, glancing over at Hibari's rapt attention, and decided to try to show off even more than usual. Hibari was amazed by the moves, their combination of power and grace better than the blonde had ever seen.

Meanwhile, the father of the house had regained his senses, and had Suba fetch the contract he'd had the Saotomes sign many years earlier. Lifting it up he reread it and breathed a sigh of relief. It read simply 'I, Saotome Genma, promise my child, Saotome Ranma, to marry into the Oozora clan, after training Ranma to become my equal in the martial arts,' followed by a second paragraph of 'I, Oozora Ibari, promise to accept the marriage of Ranma into my clan as repayment for the debts accrued by the Saotome family'. A second document was prepared and attached with blank spaced to insert which child Ranma would be engaged to.

"Phew, no mention that it has to be a daughter who marries Ranma," Ibari stated and picked up a pen. "Neither of them will be happy with the outcome, but a strong wife might just push the lad into acting more like a man... The kami know I've tried pretty well everything else."

With that Ibari filled out the second contract, so it now showed that the lone 'son' of the Oozora family was Ranma's fiancé. Ibari then stamped it with the official clan seal.

"They'll be in for quite the surprise, and it'll probably be a long while until I hear the end of it, but the boy will learn it's for his own good," Ibari told himself confidently.

Ibari spent some time thinking over how he'd break the news and was just coming to a firm idea when a sweaty Ranma and cheerful Hibari walked by the door. He raised an eyebrow when he saw
how the redhead seemed to be blushing while looking at Hibari.

"Ranma, I've got some good news for you," he said, not usually one to support such behaviour, but in this case... it just might be for the best.

"Huh?" the redhead asked.

"While I was expecting a boy to marry one of my daughters, you're in luck that I have a son, allowing the contract to still be fulfilled," the Oozora father told them happily.

"Whu-whu-what?" Ranma managed to stutter.

"WHAT?" Hibari suddenly shouted, "You can't! I refuse!"

The strong response from the beautiful blonde caused Ranma to jump a bit, not understanding why Hibari would care so much about someone else's engagement.

"Hibari, you will fulfill your duty. As. My. SON!" Ibari shouted as he marched forward.

Ranma meanwhile blinked in shock, trying to piece together what was being said. Ibari placed a calming hand on the redhead's shoulder.

"I realise this comes as a surprise. It is a shame the boy is such a pervert, but even he won't be able to resist a girl with a figure like yours, I am certain," the mustachioed man replied with a confident laugh.

"For the ten thousandth time: I am not a pervert," the blonde said sadly, large doe eyes staring up at Ibari. "And I wish you'd consider me your daughter."

Just then a bespectacled middle aged man in a gi burst around the corner of the hall with a kettle.

"I'm sorry it took me so long to get some hot water; that little girl had a grip of iron..." Genma said nervously. "But-but I can explain Ranma's condition!"

The small redhead was still frozen in shock when the hot water poured down. The sudden shift into a handsome black haired boy seemed to not even be enough to shake him from the stuper, resulting only in quiet indiscernible muttering. Hibari and Ibari slid into a similar state of shock at the transformation, the elder Oozora clutching at his chest and thankful the medication was still in full effect.

"You see, we picked up a bit of a curse in China," Genma began to explain. "I now transform into a panda when splashed with cold water, while my boy here... sadly turns into a girl. It's so humiliating."

"So, he... So he's actually a boy?" Ibari asked Genma.

"Yeah, I'm a guy!" Ranma shouted, trying not to look at the blonde who was leaving him very confused right now. Especially as the Oozoras seemed so shocked by a Jusenkyo curse, which had been Ranma's one explanation for Hibari's beauty.

Genma just nodded.

"I... I just. I finished the contract though. It's official... Ranma is engaged to Hibari here," the Oozora father stated, sweating.

"I don't see the problem?" Genma asked, "I'm surprised you chose to engage the prettiest of your
four daughters to someone you thought was a girl, but surely this is an improvement, eh?"

"I don't have four daughters," Ibari said flatly, "I have three. Hibari here... is... is my disappointing crossdressing son."

"What? Er... is there any way out of that engagement?" a sweating Genma asked.

"If you can convince him to be man enough to fall in love with a worthy woman then I can get out of it, if not... Oozora clan marriage traditions are very strict, especially as contracts like these are what so much of the family business is built upon. I can give you some time, at least," Ibari muttered.

Genma turned to Ranma, eyes filled with a cold determination, "Boy, I have always pushed you to be a true man amongst men. You must now act as a role model for this... youth. The cost of failure is... too much to contemplate."

Ranma nodded, terrified, though when he turned to the bright blue eyes of Hibari he couldn't shake a feeling of, well, something? It was a strong feeling, but that's as far as he could get. Ranma was never the best at that emotions stuff. Making eye contact with Hibari though, there was a different interest to be seen in the other teen's eyes than before.

"I suppose he is pretty cute in his true form, so it's not all bad," Hibari replied with a giggle, though if Ibari had been paying attention he'd have noticed his child's usual playful tone wasn't quite there.
Her... er, Him?!? Never! Never!

The rest of the Oozora clan and many of their employees were gathered around the koi pond in the compound's courtyard. Genma and Ranma both felt the intensity of about two dozen eyes watching them. Genma cleared his throat as the last stragglers showed up.

"I'm not entirely sure how to start this, so..." with that Genma grabbed his son by the shirt and tossed him back into the pond.

A small curvy redhead emerged in the same clothes, "Careful where ya toss me ya panda! I nearly hit my head on the bridge"

Genma huffed, but did have to admit the boy landed a little close to the stone bridge over the pond, however he had a speech to give, "My son Ranma, who's curse was just displayed, and myself both met tragedy on a training expedition to China. I turn into a Panda, while the boy... takes the embarrassing form you see now."


"Were you not prepared to sacrifice your life to the art?"

"My life maybe, but not my manhood," the pigtailed boy fumed. "Especially not needlessly. An' now I'm engaged to a guy!"

"Wait," Tsubame cut in and turned to her father. "Y-you mean you engaged him to Hibari?"

"Before I found out about the curse," Ibari defended himself desperately.

"Pfff-bwahahaha!" Tsubame laughed. "That's just to much. Hihihihheh. They're a perfect pair of deviants. Made for each other. Bwahaha!"

Ranma and Hibari both gave her glares hot enough to melt steel. She just kept laughing. Frustration building, but not wanting to hit a girl who wasn't even a martial artist, the red-haired Ranma angrily shoved his father into the pond. An angry panda burst forth from the water and began chasing the diminutive martial artist around the courtyard. Most of the thugs let out depressed sighs at the new chaos.

"I'm not sure if he's more or less confusing that Hibari," one muttered under their breath.

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After a quick shower Ranma was walking down the hall, stretching and enjoying being himself again. Accompanying him to his room were Suzume and Tsugumi, both of whom had taken the curse fairly well. To be honest Suzume may have taken it too well for Ranma's taste, having made mention of 'a new sister' at one point. Tsugumi meanwhile seemed capable of taking anything well.

"I do want to apologise for all this," Tsugumi was saying. "I am honestly disapponted with father's choice, but tradition is very important to him and his word is key to his reputation. If only he'd known the truth before signing the contract... Also, I think he might be enjoying yanking your father about a bit. I've heard his debt is quite impressive. Still, I feel sorry for you being stuck in the middle, and the risk that comes with losing."

"Luckily Saotome Ranma never loses," Ranma attempted to reply with his usual gusto, but was still
off kilter enough that it didn't quite come across right.

"I still don't understand what's so bad about it," Suzume chimed in, "Ranma-kun is very handsome, and Hibari-chan is so pretty. They'd make a wonderful couple... and sometimes Ranma is pretty too."

Ranma and Tsugumi both began to sweat awkwardly. Tsugumi at her younger sister's odd ideas. Ranma at the mention that Hibari was pretty, as he found himself struggling to deny the fact.

"W-well, they're both boys," Tsugumi replied with a half-hearted shrug, "So it's not proper or allowed."

"Are you sure?" Suzume asked.

After a moment of pondering whether her little sister was questioning the first or second statement Tsugumi realised it didn't really matter and simply nodded firmly, "Yes, quite sure."

The little girl with blue hair pouted a bit, but continued to walk with them.

"You'll be headed to Wakaba High School with Tsubame and Hibari in the morning," Tsugumi continued. "I'll try to get Tsubame to apologise. She really shouldn't have said... what she said. Either way, here's your room."

Ranma opened the door and was honestly amazed. To the average teenager in Japan the room would look like a nice dormitory set up, but to Ranma (who had no memories of having his own room and was generally used to sharing a dingy motel room at the best of times) it was palatial. A full western style bed, a desk, a bookshelf, a closet and a dresser. What would he do with all that space?

"The whole thing is really mine?" the boy with the braid asked nervously, half convinced it would prove to be a mistake only noticed because he said something.

Tsugumi meanwhile, with her... somewhat more normal upbringing was a bit shocked at Ranma's response, but managed to eventually reply, "Well yes. Honestly it's not that much. You can decorate it up as you like."

Tsugumi and Suzume wished him goodnight, and left Ranma to unpack. It didn't take long. Ranma had maybe 6 shirts, three pairs of pants, and a few other odds and ends of clothing (including a pair of swim trunks he'd probably not see a use for in a very long time). He had already left his camping gear in a storage shed, so that was it. Instead he was left to gather his thoughts. There weren't too many, and they all swirled around that beautiful blonde.

"Was that really be a guy?" Ranma sighed.

Suddenly what Ranma assumed was a closet slid open. Ranma half jumped into a defensive stance before realising who was standing there.

"I could ask you the same thing," the lovely Hibari asked.

"I-er... um... What were you doing in a closet?" Ranma stuttered.

Hibari laughed rather more than Ranma thought was fair. "I wasn't in a closet, I was in my room."

Hibari moved aside to reveal what looked perfectly like how Ranma would imagine a girl's bedroom, and then continued, "We've got attached bedrooms. Very romantic."

Hibari's smile made Ranma blush nearly as bright red as his shirt.
"Well, good night my dear fiancé," Hibari said with a romantic (though also mischievous) wink before closing the door.

A flustered Ranma changed to his boxers to prepare for bed, while wondering just what had made the closet comment so funny. That and wondering why his heart was racing like this. He wasn't into guys was he? Maybe the curse was messing with him? The confused cursed boy drifted off to an unsettled sleep.

In the room beside Hibari was staring at the ceiling.

"Jusenkyo, eh?" the blonde whispered, "I wonder how hard it is to get there. Maybe Ranma calls it a curse, but for me? It would be a blessing."

A few happy tears flowed down Hibari's cheeks.

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"Ranma-kun," a gruff voice spoke, "Ranma-kun, it's time to get up."

"Five mrrre minutes pop," Ranma muttered.

His eyelid half opened and he quickly realised that it was not his father waking him, but rather a gorilla of a man. His mind raced to piece together what was happening.

"Want a coffee or somethin'?" the large man asked. "Martial artists don't tend to smoke do they? I got smokes too."

"Huh?" Ranma grumbled.

"Anyway, here's your toothbrush," the man said, handing him a still packaged (and honestly quite nice) toothbrush. "Remember your way to the bathroom?"

"Uh... oh," Ranma blinked awake properly and (most) of the pieces fell into place. "Yeah, down the hall... on the right."

Ranma wandered towards said objective, still at least a little asleep, but made it in just fine. There was a bit of noise from the bathing area, but he paid it no mind as he hunted for the toothpaste. Suddenly the door to the bath opened, and out stepped the gorgeous blonde from the day before, wearing only a towel around the waist. Ranma blushed bright red and spun to look away as Hibari gasped and covered a flat and masculine chest. (Well, admittedly the Oozora heir's overall build was rather slight and feminine, but the chest clearly lacked typical feminine form.)

"Bright red and turning away," Hibari giggled, "A true gentleman. I'm glad my fiancé is no pervert."

"A guy," the stunned Ranma muttered after Hibari had left the room, "That was definitely a guy... And the steam from the shower is definitely hot."

His heart however was still racing, and his face still bright red, as he brushed his teeth.

"It's gotta be the curse," he said quietly. It was becoming a mantra.

"What's the curse?" the little blue haired Suzume asked, as she arrived to brush her teeth.

"N-nothing," Ranma blushed.

Ranma quickly ran through the rest of the morning preparations. Getting dressed didn't take long. He
grabbed breakfast off the kitchen table and had eaten it by the time he reached the front door, setting the bowl down on a convenient table. A slightly grumpy looking Tsubame was already getting her shoes on.

"Ah," she said nervously as Ranma followed her outside to head to school. "I suppose... I suppose I was a little harsh on you yesterday."

Ranma raised an eyebrow. He wanted to say something along the lines of: 'A little? I ain't a weirdo like your brother!', but was tired enough his brain hadn't properly formed the sentence before Tsubame continued.

"Based on how you've acted about it I'm pretty sure you didn't get that curse on purpose," the second eldest Oozora sister paused a moment. "You didn't get that one on purpose right?"

"What?" Ranma blustered, taken aback. "Of course not. I mean... A lot of the curses at Jusenkyo are way worse, so I kinda lucked out to stay human and able to talk and everythin', but the least bad still ain't somethin' I want."

She clearly mulled that answer over during a silence that lasted just long enough to get awkward, before nodding. "That makes sense. Just with Hibari around... sometimes he acts like a girl to the point even my sisters and I forget he isn't, so I know he'd probably hop in that nyan-er-whatever pool first thing."

Ranma's memory of catching Hibari step out of the shower that morning suddenly popped into his head, but then became edited with a sudden splash of cold water turning the already pretty blonde completely feminine... it was enough to push Ranma into a deep blush.

"He-he probably would," Ranma spluttered. "He's an... odd one."

" 'HE' is also right behind you two," Hibari cut in with an annoyed tone. "It's rude to talk about someone behind their back. Even if you were technically in front of me this time."

Hibari then let out a huff before hurrying ahead of the other two, striding confidently onto the school grounds. Ranma noticed something in Hibari's hand, and was figuring out what it was when his fiancée held it up and began to speak.

"Everyone! I have an announcement," Hibari declared, voice amplified by the megaphone she carried. "I, Oozora Hibari, have a fiancé now. His name is Saotome Ranma. That is all. Thank you."

Ranma was red in the face and terrified that the school populace would think about two guys being engaged, when a reassuring hand placed itself on his shoulder.

"I should probably have mentioned this earlier," Tsubame said softly, "But Hibari attends school as a girl. No one knows otherwise."

Ranma was relieved, but then filled with confusion. "And your pop allows that? Despite his efforts to make his son manly?"

"It... it's easier this way. Trust me. Father tried. Hibari won."

'Well,' Ranma thought to himself, 'so much for bein' able to pretend I didn't know him when at school. Still gotta get outta this.'

Ranma was relieved to not have to worry about rumours about his sexuality at least. Walking to the shoe lockers he saw Hibari open up one of the lockers to have a pile of envelopes fall out. Hibari
picked them all up and handed them to Ranma.

"Should give you an idea of who might want vengeance," Hibari giggled.

Ranma looked down and realised they were all love letters from various boys. He blinked as he dropped them in the trash, amazed that the whole school really did think of Hibari as a girl. Shaking his head he hurried off to the class listed on the papers he'd been given.

A few moments later he was standing at the front of the class beside the short bespectacled teacher with dark hair slightly past her shoulders.

"I would like to introduce you all to Saotome Ranma-kun," Iwasaki-sensei was saying, her voice filled with a naive (almost childlike) enthusiasm. "Saotome-kun has recently returned from a martial arts training expedition in India."

"Er, China," Ranma interrupted.

"Oh yes. Oops. That makes more sense. Anyway, it was just him and his father, journeying together. Long days and cold nights. His father's single minded focus putting the martial arts above all else. Alone with a cold man in a foreign land eventually young Ranma's patience couldn't take any more and he fled, returning to Japan to seek out the almost forgotten warmth of his mother's love and cooking."

"Er," Ranma muttered, half in shock. "N-not quite."

"Oh? Oh yes, sorry. I was just trying to fill in some details. Though I suppose that with you staying at Oozora-san's home means you've not returned to your mother's," the sensei blushed.

Meanwhile at the back of the class a lanky brown haired boy grumbled under his breath. "So that's the so called fiancé? Hmph."

He angrily tossed a crumpled note to Hibari, who opened it up. 'Ditch the loser and go on a date with me Sunday?' it asked. Hibari turned back with a smile, and Shiina tried to give off a confident and seductive wink. Hibari meanwhile just held up a sheet of paper saying 'How much will you pay? Gotta be a lot: I'm engaged'. Shiina fell out of his chair.

"Hibari, what's happening back there?" Iwasaki-sensei asked, distracted from her previous effort to seemingly convince Ranma he'd lived in a ninja village when he was 7.

"When you think of summer what food do you think of?" Hibari replied.

"Watermelon of course!" Iwasaki-sensei declared confidently. "Wait... that wasn't the subject at hand. Er, Ranma-kun, go take the seat behind Hibari-chan."

Ranma grumbled, having not realised he was stuck in the same class as his so called fiancée, and was even more annoyed to have to sit so close to Hibari. Hibari waved happily. Distracted by his grumbling he didn't notice Shiina's leg sticking out into the aisle between desks until he was already tripping. Luckily he put his hands out to catch himself and transferred the momentum to do a forward flip and land on his feet. Apart from a glaring Shiina the class broke out in applause.

"I don't like him," Shiina muttered, "And he's acting too chummy with Hibari."

Ranma mostly zoned out for the rest of the morning, and almost didn't notice when the bell rang for lunch. Almost. A call for food could never successfully get past a Saotome. Before most of the class had stood up Ranma had bounded across as series of desks and was out the door, following his nose
Standing in line Ranma quickly found himself surrounded by guys in his grade, and they were all declaring how lucky he was to get to be Hibari's fiancé. How Hibari was the most popular girl in their grade (and even had some upperclassmen interested). Especially insistent where one pair of guys, one with longish hair and another short fluffy hair. Ranma grumbled, both annoyed at a forced engagement of any sort and his personal opinion of Hibari's femininity. As he bought a curry bread from the cafeteria lady he felt briefly nostalgic for... something.

"Saotome!" a voice boomed out, "Join the rugby team! It's the sport of youth!"

Ranma turned to see a pair of very muscled guys in rugby uniforms posing dramatically as they continued to ramble about the wonders of rugby. Ranma really wasn't paying attention, and was turning away when a heavily built lad appeared and tried to talk him into joining the tennis club. Someone else appeared declaring he should join the judo club. Another guy yelled for the basketball club. Another about the golf club. Somebody else yelled about a nightclub.

Suddenly Hibari appeared between him and the crowd. With a desk, chair, and a roll of tickets.

"Calm down, one at a time," Hibari was saying, "Rushing him all at once will just cause confusion. Everyone take a ticket. 2,000 yen a pop."

"2,000!?" someone called out.

"He's the greatest martial artist of our generation. That's a steal! Handsome too!" Hibari countered.

Ranma found himself flustered by the attention and yanked Hibari away from the crowd who were pulling out their wallets. Dragging the disappointed blonde by the wrist Ranma eventually found an abandoned bit of hallway on the third floor. Ranma fumed silently for a few moments in search of words, so Hibari spoke up.

"Our school is really big on clubs and such."

Ranma continued to fume for a few more moments, gathering his thoughts.

"Why?" he asked suddenly.

"I don't really know," Hibari shrugged. "Honestly half the clubs don't even do competitions. Not sure the boxing club has ever gone to a tournament."

"No, not that," Ranma seethed, before leaning in and dropping to a whisper. "Why do you act like a girl and go to school as a girl, and just... all of that?"

"Because..." Hibari paused and sighed, "Because I love you."

Almost anyone other than Ranma would have noticed the teasing cheekiness in Hibari's voice, but Ranma never was the best at reading emotions. He'd effectively given up an ability to read emotional cues for an uncanny ability to read combat cues instead. Adding in his own confused emotions regarding Hibari and Ranma's face turned as red as his shirt. (He also didn't clue in that the explanation didn't cover the extensive history of the behaviour he'd been told of.)

"Stop with all that!" the black haired boy yelled, "I ain't interested! Just 'cause your dad's kinda crazy and bitter don't mean I have any intention of goin' through with the engagement or anything. It's just...
wrong! Not happenin'! I... I wouldn't!"

Ranma sutterered, trying to collected his thoughts, and found himself raising an accusative pointed finger, "You ain't my type! I don't go... don't swing that way! Regardless of my own condition!"

After shouting that last bit Ranma was suddenly aware the hallway had become rather less abandoned than when the conversation started, and whispered rumours were already swirling. A pair of school girls were jumping to what was the obvious conclusion. They sounded very disappointed. A few boys were whispering about it being a shame for Hibari to be 'stuck with a pervert like that', before one of them smiled and pointed out it meant that Hibari was basically single then. Shiina, who had been coming to give a proper test of Ranma's abilities (and a bit of vengeance) was rendered even more outraged by what he heard.

"I don't know what's worse," Shiina fumed, "That you've somehow wormed your way into Hibari-chan's heart, or that you apparently don't want her."

Ranma smiled. This seemed like the start of a physical fight, and those were much more his style than words.

"What's with the smile weirdo?" Shiina shot as he shifted into a boxing stance, "Ya want to get beat up?"

"I'll be amazed if you can hit me," Ranma laughed.

Shiina lunged at the pigtailed boy furiously, but his jab hit only air as Ranma swerved. A flurry of punches later and Ranma had avoided all of them, smirking the whole time. Ranma noted that by what he could assume to be normal standards of high school boxers this Shiina guy wasn't bad, but still had a long way before he could challenge Ranma. The commotion caused a crowd to start to form. Cheering and oohing followed each punch and dodge, though along with the growing crowd the rumours about Ranma's sexuality also spread through the crowd.

Not wanting to hear any more of that particular topic Ranma decided to taunt Shiina by sticking his tongue out before calmly stating: "You know, we really should take this outside."

Ranma thumbed to an open window before scurrying over and hopping out, cockily declaring: "Follow me if you're brave enough."

"Don't run away!" Shiina shouted as he leapt to follow.

The crowd rushed to the window, Hibari included.

"This is the third floor!"

"Those maniacs!"

"Lucky them, they'll land in the pool!"

Ranma's brain processed that particular fact about the same time as someone shouted it and found himself ... yelling. Not screaming. Screaming wasn't very manly, and Saotome Ranma was a man among men after all. At least he was until he hit the water.
*Splash*

Shiina Makoto floated for a few moments, stunned. His life had flashed before his eyes when he'd chased Saotome outside, and had failed to realise they were on the third floor. Despite his youth it hadn't quite finished when he'd hit the water, and middle school was still wrapping up while he floated in the cool pool. Then he realised he was still alive. Also that the chlorine in the pool was really hurting his eyes. (Well, he thought it was the chlorine.)

Shaking himself back to his senses, he saw Saotome swimming away, and the tall boxer lunged forward. Grabbing at Ranma he wondered why the martial artist's hair looked so red. His second swing caught Saotome by the pigtail, which resulted in a surprisingly high-pitched yelp.

' Weirdly girly noise,' Shiina thought to himself as he brought his other arm around Ranma's torso to grapple his foe. He was briefly wondering if Ranma had always been so short when his thought process was derailed. His grasp around the enemy had resulted in contact with something soft... no, two soft somethings. Shiina subconsciously grabbed at the mysterious softness, trying to figure out what Ranma had down his shirt.

An even more high-pitch shout followed that, and Shiina found himself thrown out of the pool, slammed on his back (slightly indented into the concrete). Out of the corner of his eye he saw Ranma rushing away, and swore he heard Ranma whisper "Pervert" while scrambling away. Shiina meanwhile was staring at the clouds, trying to piece together what it meant. Sifting through his thoughts Ranma's angry words yelled at Hibari slid into the boxer's mind: "You ain't my type! I don't go... don't swing that way! Regardless of my own condition!"

What had Ranma meant by 'my own condition'? Shiina was scratching his head trying to slot it together, when suddenly a conclusion slid into place. It was a logical conclusion. Sure, there was a loose end or two, but Shiina knew he didn't have all the facts. Still, to anyone living a fairly ordinary life it was the only explanation that would make sense. Unfortunately, it was also almost 100% wrong.

Shiina saw no reason to continue the fight based on the new 'facts'. He'd convinced himself that Hibari's 'flirting' had been meant as good natured teasing which Ranma had misread. Hibari was nothing if not a joker. She teased Shiina all the time after all. As such Shiina pulled himself out of the cracked concrete and began walking back to class, when he saw Hibari hurrying out of the school with a kettle in her hand. The blonde looked at him angrily.

"I'm sorry," Shiina shrugged, before blushing a bit. "Tell her it was an accident. I didn't know... she was really quite convincing."

Hibari just did an adorable head tilt which made Shiina grow redder.

"I also won't tell anyone," the boxer muttered. "I don't know why she's attending school as a boy, but I'll help Ranma keep her secret, as it seems important to you."

Hibari started giggling. "Thanks. Very kind of you."

"I hope this might improve your opinion of me?" the pompadoured boy asked.

"Maybe," Hibari winked before heading off.
A red-haired Ranma meanwhile had managed to find a tree to hide himself in and had just pulled off his pants to ring them out.

"Great, that lanky oaf groped me," the redhead grumbled. "Now he's probably going to go and start even more rumours. Or maybe falling in love. That's probably how it'll end with my luck."

Ranma sighed, remembering what he'd heard people were twisting his words towards Hibari into.

"Wonder though, would using the curse to pretend to be a girl less dishonourable than those rumours?" Ranma muttered to himself.

"You'd look cute in the gym uniform," Hibari called up.

"Gah!" Ranma gasped, as he tried to hide himself deeper in the tree. "Keep away from me ya pervert!"

"Hmph," Hibari grumbled. "Well then, I guess I'll just use this kettle full of hot water to make some tea then."

A mischievous wink made Ranma blush, before Hibari continued. "Of course, jumping into the pool with half the school watching on your first day, it certainly makes it seem like you want them to know about the curse. Or are you jealous I get to go to school as a girl and you want to too?"

"I ain't going for any of that pervy nonsense," Ranma fumed. "I just didn't know the school layout yet, and couldn't listen to those rumours and lies. But I ain't gonna wear dresses or nothin'. I'm a guy dang it!"

Ranma subconsciously slapped his chest for emphasis, followed by a quiet 'ow'. Both of them blushed awkwardly.

"It's not fair," Hibari whispered under her breath.

The blonde then glared at her busty fiancé, and proceed to chuck the kettle at the tree just beside his head. Upon impact with the trunk the hot water sprayed out, and changed Ranma back. Ranma nearly slipped from the branch he was on dodging the kettle. He had no idea what he'd done to warrant getting something tossed at his head. Still, he was glad for the hot water.

"Come on, let's get back to class," Hibari said as the kettle clanged back to earth.

"To listen to more lies?" Ranma glared as he hopped down from the tree, wringing his pants out on last time for good measure. "I'd rather not."

"There's a simple solution," Hibari smiled playfully, "Everyone here sees me as a girl, so you just have to seem extra lovey-dovey with me, and the rumours will stop."

Ranma just glared, "Yeah, no. I've had enough school for the day. I'm goin' home."

After a brief eye roll Hibari replied, "Fine, I'm going to class though."

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Ranma was taking off his shoes, growing impatient for the sweet release of some hot water when the father of the Ozoora clan noticed he was home. Somehow he'd managed to get splashed by a car driving through the one puddle leftover from yesterday's rain.

"You're back early," the mustachioed yakuza boss stated flatly.
"Yeah, well... you can blame 'Hibari-chan' for that," Ranma grumbled. "How does that guy even get away with goin' to school as a girl?"

"The principal is an old friend of mine," the middle aged father said as he shrugged. "He's willing to look the other way on more than a few issues. As for the situation with Hibari, when my wife passed away I fell into a period of weakness. Hibari had begun acting more feminine soon after, I think as a coping mechanism, and I was too shattered to stop him. By the time I'd snapped out of it half the boys in his class had crushes on him and the family honour was in jeopardy. Keeping the secret was less shameful, and it's only gotten worse since."

Ranma just stared at the man, unimpressed. In his current form Ranma's glare judgment felt even harsher to a man with four feminine children who often pointed the same look at him.

"Still, your presence should hopefully shake him out of it. Having another boy around his age, who at least always acts masculine will provide him a role model," Ibari nodded happily to himself. "Your curse might even help with the issue. Showing that you can act masculine even when you don't look it. I have sometimes wondered if Hibari's naturally pretty face is why he's afraid to act masculine."

Ranma sighed. "Yeah, alright. I don't much like spendin' time with deviant types, but I'll try my best to sort him out. At the very least to get outta this dumb engagement you stuck me in."

***

The hospital room in Kyushu was once more home to a tragic event. Many people had died within its walls over the years, but that fact lessened the pain of the event only for the unfeeling walls. The teen crying and holding his mother didn't care. Her eyes were closed as she was drifting towards the end.

"Mom, please, you have to hold on," Kosaku cried.

In a panic her started shaking her as he cried. The doctor began to chastise him when the woman awoke.

"Kosaku... You need to go to Tokyo... You'll be on your own... Go stay with the Tendo's. You'll-you'll look after my boy, right Soun?"

The strange man who was crying more than Kosaku bent forward and took her other arm, "Of course Harue. I swear on my honour as a martial artist."

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"Hong Kong?" the bandanna wearing lad asked, making sure he'd heard correctly.

"Yes, this is Hong Kong," the old man said in mildly accented Japanese, "Where did you think you were?"

"I'd been aiming for Tianjin... no wonder the coast seemed so much further than I thought. At least I didn't end up in Kenya," Ryoga shrugged.

The old Chinese man was knocked from his feet by the absurdity of this boy's sense of direction.

Chapter 3.5: A Man Among Men!

(AKA: Chapter 3 was too short to be it's own update.)

Ranma was relaxing in a hot spring when Hibari slid seductively out of the water before him,
wearing a very wet white button up shirt, and leaned over gracefully into Ranma's personal space. Hibari began slowly unbuttoning the shirt, while give Ranma serious bedroom eyes.

"W-what are you doin'?" Ranma stuttered.

"I-I love you," Hibari whispered.

"We-we're both guys," Ranma shot back nervously.

"Oh really?" Hibari smiled and pointed at Ranma's chest.

Ranma practically shrieked to see that he was in female form, despite the quite warm water he was sitting in. He tried to retreat, but found the water pushing him in place, while Hibari's shirt had slid off to reveal a male torso. Hibari pushed forward to hold Ranma as the redhead struggled to escape. Just before a kiss landed on his lips he found a statement escape his mouth. The kiss landed.

Gasping awake Ranma realised that what he'd said in the dream just before the kiss:

"Stop! Hibari-chan, I'm the guy!"

Ranma shivered as he held himself. The room was still fairly dark as Ranma tried to regain control over his breathing. He glanced out the window, terrified that what he said in the dream meant he'd actually wanted to kiss Hibari on some level. It had been a full week and he was still a confused mess. He whispered to himself that it was the curse. It had to be.

"Yeah! That's it! Just the curse," Ranma stated aloud, boasting to the empty room. Hoping the mantra would work better when said aloud.

"Wazz all tha' noise?" a sleepy Hibari grumbled, stumbling through the door between rooms in only a night gown. "Ya okay?"

"It's... it's nothin'," Ranma stuttered. Struggling to ignore the blonde's beautiful face.

"Oh good," Hibari replied, approaching Ranma's bed. "I'm goin' back ta sleep."

Ranma was shivering as he'd backed against the wall, and found himself sliding into a near state of shock as his fiancée slid into bed beside him and swiftly fell asleep. The blonde was out cold before Ranma could stop Hibari.

"Hey!" he grumbled. "We can't share a bed! Not when I'm just in my boxers an' your in that... whatever it is. People'll think I'm a pervert too!"

Just as Ranma was reaching over to try to shove Hibari back awake the door opened. Seiji stood there confused. Then he chuckled.

"Sorry, but boss' rules," the large man said quietly, as a produced a squirt gun and drenched a sleepy Ranma in a single shot. "Not allowed to share a bed otherwise."

The instant redhead glared.

"Izzz no fun," Hibari muttered, climbing reluctantly out of bed.

The redhead and blonde both grumpily wandered towards the dining room, only mildly surprised that Tsugumi was already hard at work cooking breakfast. Ranma had barely noticed how quickly some parts of life with the Oozora family had become routine in the past week. He certainly liked the fact that Genma was sleeping in a different building of the compound, saving him from morning
ambushes. They still got their sparring in when he got home from school, but it was nice to not be woken up by a surprise attack (though he expected the panda was just trying to lull him into a false sense of security and would begin attacking again soon).

"Morning boy," Genma grumbled as he wandered to the table, before grunting at Ranma's physical femininity and attire. "Not being a very good role model for the perv-er, Hibari-kun."

The sudden shift in tone was sparked by the Oozora father entering the room. While Hibari’s father was far from gentle about the terms he used in regards to Hibari there seemed to be a clear understanding among the Oozora clan's grunts to never use those insults themselves when Ibari was around and Genma wasn't quite sure he could get away with it either. The curly haired yakuza leader however was lost in thought as he sat down, holding a letter in his hand.

"Son," Oozora-san said firmly to Hibari. "Do you remember what I'd told you the day before the Saotomes arrived?"

"That I should give my sister her dress back?" Hibari asked with a cheeky smile.

"No, the other thing."

"That I shouldn't juggle the veggies when I'm cooking?" Hibari replied with a mischievous glint in those blue eyes. "Or was it Tsugumi who said that?"

"No!" Ibari roared as he stood up to loom over the table. "That I'd been too soft, and it was time you start rigorous training to grow into a man among men, worthy of the Oozora family! That I'd sent for a man who specialised in training the manliest yakuza!"

"Oh," Hibari giggled and winked, "That was my third guess."

"Well, I've just gotten word he's in Tokyo once more, and should be here soon," the mustachioed yakuza boss boasted, before turning to Ranma and Genma. "As for you two... When the Spartan Dragon succeeds I will need to find a different debt repayment option. Maybe Tsubame-"

At that the yakuza boss finally noticed just how Ranma-chan was dressed. Or rather, not dressed. Sitting their in only a pair of boxers, Ranma's well endowed chest was visible for all to see. Oozora-san's weak heart was not prepared for a shock like that so early in the morning, and the man collapsed clutching his chest muttering about white crocodiles. At the sound of the commotion Seiji and Suba rushed in carrying an assortment of medications for the curly haired yakuza boss. Meanwhile the rest of the family figured out what had caused the sudden attack.

"Gah, Ranma!" Tsubame shouted angrily. "Show a bit of feminine modesty!"

Ranma's anger flared at that. "Feminine modesty? What do I need that for? I ain't a girl!"

"Still, in that form you can be distracting to the men around here," Hibari cut in. "Here, this'll help."

The red head caught the tossed object before cluing in as to what the item was until it was in his hands, at which pointed he yelped. "$bra?! I ain't gonna wear one a those! I'm not a pervert! Take your dumb thing back."

As Ranma shoved the offending undergarment back at Hibari it allowed Tsubame get a better look at it and what she saw drew her back in the conversation.

"That's my bra! Hibari!"
The brunette lunged across the table at her blonde sibling, who was already running off, tongue out mischievously. The petite Ranma grumbled, but turned to go back to his room and put on an undershirt. Then he'd grab a shower.

While the teens of the house were occupied there was a knock at the door, and the thug stationed there opened it to find an intimidating man in an all black suit, a white tie, slick backed hair, a pencil mustache, and distinctive pointed sunglasses. The panicked guard called out for Ibari, who quickly made his way to the door (having recovered from his early heart issues) with Genma in tow.

"You seem troubled," the Spartan Dragon said to Ibari.

"It's that obvious?" the Oozora clan patriarch replied (not realising Genma was holding a sign behind him that read 'Oozora-san is troubled') and then he continued. "Come in and we shall discuss it."

As they walked in the little blue haired Suzume strolled in (oddly enough wearing a sweater with her name on it, though it wasn't like Ranma didn't have an undershirt similarly emblazoned with his own name). Looking up at the fierce yakuza trainer Suzume was shocked when the man removed his sunglasses to display a frightening sight of almost impossibly far set and small yet intense eyes. The young girl burst into tears and ran off.

"That was a very small child," Spartan shot coldly. "What was she doing here? This is a place for men."

"She's my daughter," Ibari stabbed back. "I try to run a family oriented gang."

The Spartan Dragon seemed less than approving of that, but knew it was not his place to say. Instead he just followed the two middle aged stocky men to a seating area, put his sunglasses back on, and waited as Seiji served some tea.

"I must say, it is an honour to meet the Spartan Dragon," Genma spoke up (knowing that Ibari liked to focus on his tea when drinking it). "I have heard you are the toughest yakuza trainer in Japan, a fierce martial artist, and perhaps the very embodiment of true masculinity."

"It has been said," Sparta Tatsugorou replied. "I am curious as to why I have been called here though. Oozora-san was rather cryptic with his request."

"I need you to train my son," the Oozora father replied. "He... is my only heir, yet is a severe disappointment, whatever I try."

"Hmm," Sparta sighed, "I will need to meet him of course."

Oozora's reply was cut off by a blonde running past the door, followed by an angry brunette demanding the return of one of her skirts. The chaos was followed by a casual looking boy with a short braid in his black hair who only seemed to half care about the chaos, choosing the loiter near the door. Sparta began to appraise the youth.

"This is your son?" the man replied, continuing before he got a reply. "He seems in good shape, but perhaps a bit too relaxed. Hair is much too long though. Silk shirt might be a little soft for a real man."

Genma coughed, and then thought back to a certain contract he'd signed a little over a decade earlier.

"Actually, that is my own son. If you wish to include him in your training it would be appreciated. His martial arts are excellent, but he rather lacks respect. Along with a certain... other issue."
Ranma rolled his eyes.

Sparta nodded sternly. "My own son is similar. Then where is Oozora-san's boy?"

Oozora Ibari grew a bit red in the face from frustration, before yelling: "Hibari-kun, get in here!"

The blonde from earlier appeared, wearing a mini-skirt, cute poofy sweater, and bright red stockings.

"Yes dad?" Hibari replied as she appeared at the door.

Sparta spat out the tea he was drinking, drenching Genma (who was glad it was such a warm beverage). The yakuza trainer was on his feet in an instant, glaring at the blonde. Furiously he whipped off the sunglasses to increase the intensity of his stare. The response was on he’d never received before. Hibari simply burst out laughing.

"He looks like a flatfish," the heir of the Oozora clan giggled.

Ranma gave the man a second appraisal and had to agree with his fiancée. "You're right, he does."

The Spartan Dragon was shocked to his core. Still, a true man relished a challenge. He was going to have to investigate.
The two first years found themselves walking to school alone. Tsubame, being rather upset over the bra incident from breakfast, had left early while Ranma was made to wait for Hibari. As they walked Hibari kept sliding closer and closer to Ranma, pushing into the pig-tailed boy's personal space.

"Seriously, can ya back off a bit?" Ranma grumbled. "People might get the wrong idea or somethin'."

"What sort of wrong idea?" Hibari giggled and stuck a tongue out. "That we're engaged?"

Ranma was readying a 'witty' response when he noticed a dog watching them a little too intently. Something about it seemed almost human. He was trying to remember if there was a cursed spring of a drowned dog when a familiar voice cut into his train of thought.

"So, seriously, what is with the whole 'going to school as a guy' thing anyway?" the lanky Shiina asked, tossing a cigarette butt aside.

"I. AM. A. Guy," Ranma hissed.

"Riiight," Shiina shrugged, "I didn't mean to grab what I grabbed, but... guys don't exactly have chests like that."

Ranma just shot him a look that tried it's best to injure the taller teen. Of course Ranma knew of no technique that could actually wound with just a look, but he was very interested in learning if any such style existed.

"Listen, I told Hibari I'd keep your secret," the boxer replied in a only mildly slimy manner, "I just want to know a little bit more, so I can play along properly. And to make sure you don't drag the lovely Hibari-chan into anything perverted."

Ranma couldn't help himself and burst out laughing, "Me? Drag 'her' into something perverted? Bwahaha!"

Hibari glared at him, before giving a (totally not made up on the spot, no sir) reply, "Mr. Saotome, Ranma's father, was so determined to have a son to carry on his legacy that when he had a daughter he decided to raise her as a boy anyway. Since her dad is living with us training some of my dad's men I was just trying to give more evidence to her identity with the 'engagement' thing. It's important to her honour that no one finds out she's a girl."

"Right... and tomorrow we'll meet an alien princess in a tiger stripe bikini," Ranma grumbled.

"Well, isn't it true you don't want the school to find out you're a girl?" Hibari replied with a stuck out tongue.

"I ain't a girl!"

Shiina meanwhile was left standing and shaking his head in confusion, and wondering what scantily clad alien princesses had to do with cross dressing martial artists. As his classmates walked around a corner suddenly the dog that had been following them stood up on its back legs and removed what
turned out to just be a highly realistic dog mask. Underneath was a man's face with slicked back hair, a pencil mustache, and sharp sunglasses.

"Hmm... Trying to maintain the illusion, even at school. This'll be a challenge," Sparta muttered, glad to breathe easier with the dog mask removed.

"Wahh!" Shiina shouted, even more confused.

"Grawrf!" Sparta barked at the lad, sending him fleeing in confusion.

Once the lanky boxer had fled Sparta continued to bring his thoughts into words, "Over ten years on the job, training Yakuza to follow the manly path they must follow. I'd thought I'd seen it all, but Hibari... this should be a true challenge to lead him to the path of manhood. Good to have a second student in that Ranma boy though, competition is a good driver for students. Though if the curse is really what his father said, it may be a challenge. I'd never believe a man could become a panda without seeing it myself... Let's see how well the two preform at school."

***

The results of the first midterms were up. Ranma was a bit embarrassed to have his sitting up there, near the bottom of the list, but he was honestly proud to have almost passed in most of his classes. Having been out of school since the start of grade seven, and only arriving a few days before the midterms started, high 50s in everything but English (which he'd still managed a not terrible 48 in) and Gym (the one class he was doing well in) was a good start. He only had to aim for the high 60s in future to pass, that was doable. He was still bitter know that some schools counted 50% as a pass, but not Wakaba.

Everyone else's eyes however were on the top of the list.

"Hibari got first place!"

"I knew she was smart, but wow, top in our year!"

"When does she find time to study?"

A couple of guys who Ranma recognised from his class slid over to him.

"I bet you'll be having some nice intimate study sessions with Hibari-chan, eh Saotome-kun?" asked the boy with fluffier brown hair.

"Man, I'd like to have her as a tutor," the one with medium-length black hair replied.

"I'd prefer to spend as little time as possible with hi...Hibari," Ranma grumbled. He was still shocked though, Hibari seemed so care free, not the studious nerdy type.

Meanwhile a slick Yakuza trainer's head popped out from a trash-can, and muttered, "Surprising. Top of his school. The other lad is a slacker though."

A juice box bopped off his head as a student tried to be responsible and dispose of their trash. Clearly trash cans weren't always the best disguise.

***

The other guys still gave Ranma lots of space while he changed for gym. Not that he minded. The previous Friday had seen a few guys get into a water fight with their water bottles, and hoping to
avoid any issues with that in future he'd taken to changing discreetly in a corner. He did however
mind why they avoided him. Rumours he was gay, or Shiina's conviction he was actually a girl,
were not things he was comfortable with (his father would definitely disapprove of either). Luckily
changing didn't take long, and he was soon out able to show off with the high jump, leaping over
with a graceful back flip, before landing on his feet on the other side. There was a bit of applause
from both the guys around and the girls waiting for their turn.

As the guys finished Ranma flopped onto the grass, and found the two guys from before sitting to
either side of him. They watched as the girls went through the high jump practice as well. When
Hibari's turn finally came up the bare was raised as high as it had been for Ranma, and the graceful
blonde vaulted over easily (if not quite with quite as much show as Ranma).

"She's so cute," the raven haired guy said. (Ranma was pretty sure his name was Ken.)

"Is not," Ranma grumbled, trying to convince himself that was his opinion.

"Great grades, one of the best athletes in our year, and she never brags or nothing," the brown haired
one replied. (Thinking for a moment Ranma remembered his name was Haruki.)

"What I'd give to be in your position Ranma," Ken added.

"Trust me, you don't want to be," Ranma grumbled.

"Yeah, she's wait out of our league," Haruki added. "She'd probably just ignore us. Not like you,
you lucky dog. Swooping in to be her fiancé, and winning her with those kung-fu skills."

"It's more karate than kung-fu," Ranma grumbled. "Though I did pick up a bit of kung-fu in China."

Across the field Sparta's head popped out from a sand pit, and he muttered further observations to
himself. Both students had impressive physical abilities. If Ranma was as good a fighter as his father
claimed the boy might also prove a good sparring partner for Sparta's son.

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Walking home from school Ranma was annoyed by a sudden rain shower. As his clothes became
looser (apart for around the chest) he heard Hibari giggle. He turned to see the blonde holding an
umbrella and offering for Ranma to squeeze under it.

"You'd think with that curse of yours you'd learn to pay more attention to the weather."

"I gave up after a couple weeks in China. If I have an umbrella then I slip into a puddle, or the
wind'll blow the umbrella inside out, or somethin" the redhead shrugged. "The curse makes me a
water magnet. 'Sides, a brave man likes to feel a little weather on his face."

Sparta meanwhile shivered from his vantage point. Genma had told him of the curse, and shown him
the panda curse, but seeing the sex changing curse in action was quite another thing entirely. No
wonder the balding martial artist had wanted his son to study under Sparta. With a curse like that the
boy needed to be kept on the narrow path of manhood. It also unsettled Sparta deeply. The
Saotome's effort to keep up a masculine demeanor was admirable though, and Sparta focused on
that.

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"Hibari has the potential to be a cut above most men," Sparta told Ibari, having returned to the
household for the evening. "His grades and athletic abilities are exceptional."
"Of course," the Yakuza father beamed. "He is my son."

"He is also... a total deviant," Sparta continued.

The Oozora father slipped from his seated position, face on the floor and legs in the air. It was only a moment before he righted himself and grumbled, "Well, yes. That is why he needs training."

Sparta nodded, "I think I shall have to resort to severe methods. Is that acceptable?"

"Of course," the yakuza boss replied.

"Ranma will prove a useful foil for the boy," Sparta added, his body becoming stiff as he remembered what he'd seen. "Apart from his... embarrassing curse, he is reasonably manly. Could use a bit of polishing though."

Genma nodded, "Any improvement helps."

"I'll meet them both in the dojo then."

***

Ranma was freshly showered and headed towards the dojo when he overheard voices in one of the large building's sitting rooms.

"I wouldn't like a manly Hibari-chan," Suzume was saying. "I like him how he is."

"We've just been spoiling him too much, that's the problem!" Tsubame replied. "Especially you two!"

Ranma popped his head in to see Tsugumi give a fairly apathetic shrug. "He's our brother. I just want him to be happy."

Tsubame looked up to see Ranma and pointed a finger at him. "What about you? Do you want him manly? Or do you like having another weirdo around you?"

"I ain't a weirdo!" Ranma shot back. "I'm a man, an' I don't have any interest in weird girly things. Girls are soft an' cry a lot, an'... ya know."

Tsubame's eye twitched for a few moments at the sexism, before she realised something and gave a reply: "You didn't actually answer the question about Hibari."

"Oh, uh," Ranma stuttered, and began to wonder why he felt some uncertainty. Ranma had to shrug. "If he can manage it. Bein' manly takes strength and grit. It's gonna take a bit to build up someone as soft as him."

With that Ranma wandered off to the Oozora Dojo, wondering why he felt so apprehensive about Hibari's training (not that Ranma was looking forward to having someone other than he father demand impossible standards of manliness for himself either). He found Sparta waiting patiently in a gi, looking stern with his sharp sunglasses. Hibari showed up soon after Ranma, in a baggy sweater and skinny jeans. Ranma snorted at the outfit.

"You're going to train in that?" Ranma asked pointedly.

"It's comfy," Hibari countered.

"We shall begin," Sparta began calmly, removing his sunglasses to reveal his beady uncannily wide
set eyes. He didn't need bickering students.

"Flatfish," Hibari giggled. Ranma gave quick chuckle too.

An outraged Sparta lunged across the room and slapped them both across the face.

"SHOW RESPECT!" he bellowed.

Ranma glared, used to this sort of discipline from his father. As well as some other sensei's they'd encountered. Hibari however gave a feminine whine, a hand caressing the slapped cheek.

"That was mean," the blonde said. Ranma was about to roll his eyes, but something about Hibari's tone made him realise the blonde was playing things up.

"ACT LIKE A MAN!" Sparta shouted at the blonde, "Those clothes! They're encouraging weakness and femininity! When you look so girly how can you act manly?!

He leaped towards Hibari, and began pulling the baggy sweater off, despite the Oozora heir's protesting. Ranma however seethed at the statement that appearance was so decisive to manliness, some things couldn't be controlled. As Sparta ripped the sweater away, Hibari was left standing there in a bra, backed nervously into a corner.

"How can you be a man wearing a bra?!" the yakuza trainer roared, yanking the bra from Hibari, while Ranma nodded, agreeing for once (but finding himself looking away with a confused blush). Once the garment was firmly removed the man then glanced around nervously and tucked it into a pocket, before whispering: "I'll hold onto that."

Ranma and Hibari were both more than a little unsettled by that, making nervous eye contact.

"The hair needs to go too!" Sparta roared once more, pulling out a pair of scissors, "Men should not have such long hair! Crew cuts or slicked back only!"

"Hey!" Ranma objected. His own hair was probably about as long as Hibari's, just styled less femininely. Unfortunately he was under strict instructions not to interfere with Hibari's training, and so was left just grumbling, though he swore Sparta would pay if the scissors went anywhere near Ranma's own pigtail.

Sparta ignored him, and charged Hibari. The blonde resisted, arms moving up to hold off the yakuza trainer's own arms, and especially the scissors, leaving Hibari's chest fully exposed. Ranma looked away nervously and blushed, before remembering that it was a male chest, and besides, he'd seen his own female chest plenty of times, so why get nervous either way?

The struggle between Sparta and Hibari continued, unaffected by Ranma's internal confusion (which kept him seated out of the way). Hibari put up a valiant effort, but Sparta was both taller and stronger, the two things that decided a direct battle of strength like that. Finally his arm broke free, and the scissors slide to Hibari's bangs, chopping a few strands a good bit shorter than the rest. Hibari watched wide eyed as the strands of hair fell. Then those bright blue eyes grew cold and narrowed.

"You threw the first blow," Hibari stated flatly.

Ranma and Sparta could both feel a steely aura of cold rage sliding off the blonde, and Sparta stumbled back nervously.

"W-where's this determination coming from?" the stunned yakuza trainer muttered.
Hibari's was behind Sparta before the average person could blink, grabbing him by the collar and tossing him into a wall. Before the man could get back to his feet the blonde was upon him again, an uppercut throwing him into the ceiling. As he crashed down he landed on another fist and slammed into a different wall. A final blow saw him scream as he crashed into the floor, where Sparta was implanted firmly into the floorboards. Hibari then ran over and grabbed the sweater for modesty. Ranma was left blinking as the rest of the household burst in. Hibari blushed and ran out, while the others then turned their eyes to a half conscious Sparta.

"He's fast," the man was muttering.

"Ranma? What did you do?" Genma shouted angrily.

"It wasn't me pops!" Ranma answered, "I waited my turn like you asked... Hibari is a much better fighter than I'd a ever guessed."

As the others all looked stunned Ranma decided to hurry after the 2nd youngest Oozora, wanting to discuss martial arts. Sure, the blonde wasn't on his level, but could prove a decent sparring partner with a bit of training. He found Hibari in her room, placing a headband over the lopsided haircut. Ranma slid into the room nervously.

"You're actually pretty good."

"You think so?" Hibari asked a bit shyly, looking at him via the reflection in the mirror.

"Good and fast. Decent technique. Definitely not much going on defense-wise and could use strength training," Ranma added, not wanting to be too generous, "But strong potential. I'd like to spar you a bit. Train you some. Toughen ya up."

Hibari beamed, which honestly surprised Ranma. "I'd love that!"

"R-really?" Ranma stuttered. "I was thinkin' you'd object. Wantin' to be all soft an' girly an' stuff."

"I've got to know how to defend myself," Hibari said as she shrugged. "Plus I've seen you sparring with the panda. All sweaty and ragged. It'll be fun to see you looking like that, very attractive."

Ranma slipped from his feet in shock.

"That-that's not the right mindset!"

Hibari just giggled and winked at him.

***

"So, you're really movin' ta Tokyo?" the freckled boy with dark hair just short of his shoulders and a strong Kyushu accent asked.

"Yeah, the train's in a week," Kosaku replied.

"Too bad we never settled that bet," the other boy laughed, "Guess I win?"

"What?" Kosaku gasped, "What makes ya think that?"

"Kimoya Nimura, from class 2."

"She's your girlfriend already?" Kosaku gasped.
"Not quite, but I'm on the attack. She'll be my girlfriend before ya make it ta Tokyo though. I can promise you that. I'll be makin' third base within a month."

"You're a pervert sometimes Dai," Kosaku grumbled.

"Don't change that I'm winnin'," his friend Daisuke laughed.

"Yeah... well, I'll find a girlfriend quick in Tokyo. I can promise ya that," Kosaku nodded. "She'll be pretty too. It's the big city, so the girls are prettier and more fashionable."

"Six months," Daisuke replied. "I'll give ya six months to find a girl."

Kosaku began to sweat, having been hoping for more time, but couldn't back down. "Alright, sounds good."

"An what'll ya do if ya lose?"

"I-I'll shave my head!"

"Right, it's a bet," Daisuke laughed. "I'll be in to check, don't you worry. And since you think big city girls are so pretty, if she's prettier as Setsu I'll shave my head."

As the two boys shook on it a third lad about their age appeared. He was clearly travel weary, with a large backpack and distinctive bandanna.

"Do you know the way to Nerima from here?" Ryoga asked.

"Nerima, what's that?" Daisuke asked.

"That's on the other end of Japan, in Tokyo," Kosaku replied, "It's actually where I'm goin' next week."

"Other end of Japan?" Ryoga asked. "Where am I then... Chiba?"

The two other teens were blown off their feet by the absurdity, face planting in the dirt.

"You're in Kyushu," Kosaku replied as he dusted himself off. "Tokyo is a thousand kilometres east a' here."

Ryoga nodded, and began walking to the south.

Chapter End Notes

Author's notes on fighting ability:
Trying to balance out abilities between the two stories is a little tricky, but the Sparta's provide the best metric available. The elder Sparta is labelled as the top Yakuza drill master in Japan, and is clearly a top end martial artist. Hibari knocks him about pretty effectively. Kotatsu Sparta, the younger Sparta, meanwhile is probably better than his father. As Hibari wasn't intimidated by him, I think it would be safe to put those two on roughly the same level. Kotatsu also seems to have a similar vagabond martial artist feel akin to many of Ranma's challengers (Kumon for instance). Overall that leads me to guess at Hibari being somewhere a bit below Shampoo or Ukyo in canon.
Rink Side Love

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Ranma was sweating a bit after a sparring session with Hibari. He wondered why every time he had an opening to strike the blonde he could only go in for a light poke or tap. Nearly two weeks into his stay with the Oozora's and Ranma still grappled with feelings of uncertainty and emotional confusion. Consciously he saw Hibari as a guy, but his subconscious refused to accept it. Had to be the curse.

The blonde in question meanwhile was panting heavily (the motion drawing Ranma's eyes, and confirming for the 100th time the lack of a bust), but beaming that smile which made Ranma further question his own sexuality.

"I actually landed a few hits today," Hibari managed between breaths, "And I think you have to admit my strength isn't really too lacking."

"Fine," Ranma replied, "You're decently strong. Surprising since you're a twig... Still too soft on defense though."

Hibari reply by sticking out her tongue.

Suddenly the door to the dojo slid open and Suzume burst in, running around them shouting too quickly for either teen to make out.

"We're gonna go skating! Skating! Yay!" they finally parsed out after the fourth or fifth lap.

"Skating?" Ranma gulped.

"Don't tell me that the amazing Saotome Ranma can't skate?" Hibari giggled.

"Never bothered to learn, pops said it was girly."

"Well, now I can teach you something," Hibari winked, once more cracking at Ranma's resolve.

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Ranma grumbled and paid for his ticket. A few minutes later he was lacing up, still grumbling. Hibari was waiting impatiently as the pig-tailed boy walked awkwardly to the rink, placed a foot on the ice and... slipped onto his back

"Oh, very graceful," Hibari laughed.

"Yeah yeah, laugh it up," Ranma replied as he struggled back to his feet, only to fall again a few moments later.

"Come on, take my arm, I'll help you."

"I'm not gonna hold on all undignified, it's not manly," Ranma protested.

Three more falls, and a pair of kids laughing at him, proved too much for Ranma. He fumed and pulled off the skates, wandering towards a washroom.
"Where's he going?" Tsubame asked as she skated up to Hibari.

"When you gotta go, you gotta go," Hibari replied with a shrug.

A few moments later a short busty redhead emerged from the men's room. As Ranma wandered onto the ice and put his skates on again he found he couldn't even get upright now.

"Oh, right," he muttered, "they're the wrong size now."

Hibari just giggled while he took them back off. Sighing he wandered back to the skate rental desk. The slightly acne afflicted lad behind the counter's attention was captured instantly.

"Excuse me, mister, I think I go the wrong size of skates," the little redhead said adorably, handing over the skates.

"Oh yeah," the guy said nervously. "These have gotta be way too big. Wrong style too. I'll give you a discount for the confusion miss. If you'd like we've got a sizing scale over there, just put your foot in and tell me the number."

Ranma did as instructed. "It says 22 mister."

Almost instantly the man appeared with a tiny pair of pink and white skates.

"Here you go miss," he smiled.

"Er, ya got any a little less... pink?" Ranma replied, annoyed out of his cutey act.

"You don't-You don't like pink?" the guy asked with a terrified tone. He didn't want to upset a cute girl. "Um... We've only got women's 22s. Or boy's."

"I'll go for the boy's, assuming they ain't pink."

In a few seconds he had a nice pair of red and black skates in his hands, with a big smile. The skates were on his feet quickly, and he was on the ice again. A few seconds later and his rear was on the ice again too.

"Ow," he grumbled. "Still, not as far to fall, and a fair bit more padding."

"You willing to accept some help now?" Hibari asked, skating up beside the redhead, an arm out.

"Yeah, alright," Ranma grumbled. "Only until I get this figured out. Can't be too hard to manage."

While he took Hibari's hand he proved quite reluctant to stand up, instead crouching awkwardly.

"What happened to all they manly pride?" Hibari asked with an eye roll.

"You seen this chest?" Ranma asked, a finger pointing in a rather undignified manner (that resulted in several male skaters nearby losing their footing as they made sure to see what they could). "I ain't exactly a man right now. A girl bein' clumsy on the ice looks a lot less silly than a guy."

"Oh, really?" the blonde asked.

"Like you'd know either way," Ranma mumbled.

The two ended up skating in silence for a bit. After about a minute Hibari grumbled and yanked Ranma into a more upright position, which elicited some complaints, but a few panicked yelps.
interrupted Ranma's ability to argue. He was just starting to get confident enough to let go of his skating partner when a handsome brown-haired teen slid up towards the pair.

"What a beautiful sight," the man with a figure skater's elegance smiled. "You two lovely ladies are a very pleasant surprise. Unfortunately though, I must ask you to move off the ice for a bit. A matter of safety you see, my partner and I need to do some rather intensive training."

He then leaned in a little too close to the pair of them. "I'll be happy to spend some time with you two later though."

"Miiiiikaaadoooo!" an annoyingly cutesy girl shouted. "Do your girl chasing later. I want to get the Assault of 100 Foes done now!"

"Yes Asuza," Mikado replied. "You two girls stay safe."

Hibari and Ranma were confused at the rather strange name for a skating move, until they looked around to see a swarm of men in hockey player gear, all moving forward aggressively.

"Only in Nerima," Hibari grumbled as they skated to one side (well, Hibari skated, Ranma was more towed).

"Huh?" Ranma asked.

"Probably combat skating or something weird like that," Hibari replied. "So many oddballs in this ward. I blame all the manga and anime studios. People want to show off. They'll do anything dumb to inspire the next big hit."

As the hockey players moved into position Ranma half remembered that someone had told him Nerima was known for anime and turnips... or was it radishes? Either way, martial artist versions of varying activities seemed a much better selling point to him. Everyone should have led with that.

The hockey players descended, as Mikado lifted Asuza into the air. The pair began to spin, Azusa kicked furiously, sending opponents flying every which way. Then the pair split up, Mikado slid into a particularly thick clump of hockey players, and lashed out with elbows and knees to knock the men from their feet in seconds. Azusa meanwhile swept a number of ankles with a number of low kicks, then took out her last opponent with a dangerous looking kick to the face, splitting his mask with her skating blade, though impressively stopping before she cut his face.

"9 seconds," one of the men lying on the rink sighed. "Truly they are the golden pair."

"Hmph," Azusa replied. "If Mikado concentrated, instead of showing off to those girls, we'd have been done faster."

"I can't help that I'm a showman," Mikado smiled as he skated toward Ranma and Hibari, a comb in his hair. "Did you ladies enjoy the show?"

"Yeah!" Ranma replied, ignoring his distaste for being called a lady. "That's way more fun than regular skating. Better moves than hockey too. I coulda probably finished 'em all in 5 seconds myself though."

"Spirited little thing, aren't you?" Mikado laughed. "And you, my lovely blonde angel?"

"Fighting's not really my top interest," the yakuza heir replied, before a mischievous smirk grew on her lips. "You're fairly cute though, so that made it better."
Sure, Hibari knew the guy was a slime, but watching Ranma get flustered about Hibari flirting, and then get flustered over the fact he got flustered, was too funny to miss.

Mikado Sanzenin smiled seductively. "Always glad to please a cute girl like you. Perhaps I can make your day even better."

With that he placed a hand seductively on Hibari's chin, and moved his face so that their lips were mere inches apart. Hibari's eyes narrowed, fist clenching in preparation for any further movement.

"HEY!" Ranma shouted angrily.

"Hmm?" Mikado blinked and turned to the diminutive redhead, his face still very close to Hibari's.

"What do you think you're-WAAAH!" Ranma's shouted was interrupted as he found himself slipping, still not steady on skates.

Before he could hit the ground Sanzenin had caught him, "Poor girl, so innocent. I'll happily teach you to skate."

"Er, no thanks," Ranma replied as he realised he'd been physically swept of his feet and he began squirming awkwardly (not unlike a cat... but it would be best not to share that particular comparison with him).

"At least let me steal a little prize for catching you," Sanzenin smiled.

Ranma couldn't reply as Mikado moved in quickly for the kiss. As their lips met Ranma slid into a state of shock. He stopped processing anything of his surroundings, only vaguely aware he'd been placed back on the ice, and was slowly drifting forward. Suddenly tears filled his eyes, and he burst into a frightened scramble away, no rational thoughts in his mind.

Watching the small redhead flee Sanzenin felt a twang of guilt. "So pure. So innocent. I should have saved her to be girl number 1000 on my list of kisses. Oh well. 999 is still an important number."

Ranma barely registered that as he opened the door out of the rink, remembering there were public baths in the building. He also completely missed Hibari tensing up, eyes filled with rage. All that repeated through Ranma's mind as he scrambled into the baths was 'How dare he? How dare he?'. Ranma was so furious he rushed through the bathing area and leapt into the tub without so much as removing his skates (to the disappointment of the men in the bathing area). As a black haired boy rose from where the red-haired girl had dove in, with the same clothes on, the men began to look around for a hidden camera or something to explain the oddness. One poked around, convinced the redhead was still under water.

Fuming, Ranma marched back to the skating rink, barely noticing the pain in his feet from the much too small skates. Stomping out onto the ice, with murder in his eyes, Ranma had his quest for revenge thrown into confusion by what he saw.

Sanzenin was already unconscious, slumped against a cracked side board with a furious Hibari standing over him, fists balled and eyes filled with nearly as much murderous intent as Ranma felt in his own heart. Ranma stomped over to the blonde, not sure if he was angry Hibari for robbing him of vengeance, or glad to actually have someone take his side for once in his life. When Ranma finally reached the blonde (oblivious to the damage he was doing to the rink with his stomping, and Azusa's protests about it) he decided that the anger was stronger.

"THAT WAS MY FIGHT!" Ranma roared.
Hibari shot him an icy glare, "Well sorry for trying to defend your honour."

"A man doesn't need someone else to defend his honour!" Ranma shot back.

"OH! Now you care about being manly!" Hibari countered. "You just want to cherry pick what you see as the best of both worlds!"

"And you don't you... you pervert!?" Ranma roared. "For the first time in my life I'm truly and properly angry, and you've robbed me of the satisfaction of beating up the guy responsible!"

Hibari seemed ready to say something, but instead tears welled up in those bright blue eyes and the blonde skated away in bitter silence. Ranma let out a primal roar, and smashed his fist into the ice, needing to destroy something. He then tore off the painfully tight skates, before deciding to go for a rooftop hopping run.

"Oh boy," was all Tsugumi managed to say as she gathered up her younger sisters to return home.

Azusa meanwhile began doodling on Mikado's face, and many of their training buddies joined in. That would teach Mikado for dropping his guard so much towards girls he found cute.

It was evening by the time Ranma returned to the Oozora compound. He landed in the backyard, having leapt over the wall, and stormed through the large household. His fuming was interrupted by the appearance of Tsugumi.

"Oh, Ranma, you're back," the eldest Oozora daughter smiled compassionately. "I hope you're feeling a bit better?"

Ranma grumbled something incoherent.

"Oh hey, it's lover boy," Tsubame laughed as she strolled in. "You know, we really should tell Mikado the truth. He thinks he's kissed 999 girls now, but it's probably more like 998 and ½."

"Tsubame, stop teasing. And Ranma, don't let it bother you so much," Tsugumi tried to reassure him. "It's just a kiss. I'm sure you'll forget about it soon enough. I'm certain that guy will..."

"Mhm, not really a big deal, since you're both boys it barely counts," Tsubame laughed. "Unless maybe it was your first kiss. It wasn't... was it? That would be too much!"

The silence provided the answer, and Tsubame burst out laughing. Tsugumi couldn't help but giggle a little too. Ranma's aura turned dark and he stomped off to his room. He flopped angrily onto his bed, screaming something into his pillow. The sulking was interrupted as the divider between his room and Hibari's opened.

"So, pouting is manly?" Hibari asked. "I think dad wants me to take notes on these things."

"Oh, here to laugh at me too?" Ranma hissed.

"No," Hibari replied with surprising empathy, as the blonde sat down beside Ranma on the bed. "I've come close to your situation too many times. You've got to learn to be better prepared for those types of guys."

"You didn't fare much better. He almost kissed you," Ranma grumbled as he sat up. "If I hadn't said something-"

"I'd have socked him before our lips touched," Hibari replied confidently. "My guard is always up
for those sorts of guys."

"Oh?" Ranma said, a hand sliding under Hibari's rear, and another on the beautiful blonde's shoulder, swept the yakuza heir into Ranma's lap, and their lips sat mere centimetres apart.

Both teens blushed, until Ranma's eyes grew wide as he realised what he was doing, and he leapt backwards, stumbling onto his combination of a need to defend his own honour and subconscious desire had caused Ranma to act without thinking. Waving his arms in front of him the pig-tailed martial artist began blurring out excuses.

"I wasn't – I wouldn't – no way would I kiss ya. Having – having a guy as my first and second kiss would be too much. No. Can't do it!" he was rambling.

"Hmmph, you're far too shy," Hibari replied, trying not to let the words sting.

"You keep thinking the curse is making me open to that sorta weird stuff, don't ya?" Ranma shot.

"What I WAS HOPING was that it might make you a little more understanding of my own struggle. And a little more open, but not to anything weird. Just love, despite whatever cruel jokes of gender the Kami have played on both of us," the blonde countered. "Instead all I get is pain as you keep seeming ready and then pull away. Do you know how much that hurts? I see something like love in your eyes for a moment, then it's replaced with disgust every time! Plus the pain of seeing you complain about something I'd give anything for..."

Ranma felt stunned by the open admission of something he'd said as an insult before. Along with how much the words hurt him. As the blonde stormed back across the divider and slammed the door between the two of them he was left trying to process just what it meant. Slowly he convinced himself that Hibari's motives had to be perverted. After all, Hibari used the girl's change room, and in Ranma's opinion anyone born a man who did that had to be some sort of deviant and pervert... even if Hibari seemed more interested in guys. How did that mesh?

His thoughts were interrupted by the sound of sobbing across the divider. For a brief moment he wanted to go over and comfort Hibari, but then talked himself out of it. Clearly he was just too confused and stressed out today.

***

Leaping off a boat before it was properly docked, a Chinese girl in bright clothing smiled to herself. She was finally on the trail of her enemy again. Dusting herself off quickly she set off towards the city centre.

"Did that girl have blue hair or purple? I couldn't tell in this light," a dockworker asked, too tired to really care about stopping her.

"Looked more purple to me," his coworker replied.

"Nah, that was definitely blue," another disagreed.

The argument would continue the rest of the shift.

Chapter End Notes
I'm sure Mikado will come back again at some point.
Flying through the air, Ranma once again found himself have to bend and twist to avoid the stone bridge that crossed the Oozora koi pond. One of these days he was certain he'd hit it, but luckily this time there was just a splash. Angrily the instant redhead charged out to return to sparring with his father, now set on ensuring the man ended the fight as a panda. After a few more minutes he succeeded, just as Tsugumi announced lunch was ready. Ranma bounded off his father's furry head to take a more direct route to food, and sat himself in his normal spot between Ibari and Hibari. Genma arrived soon after, and both were provided some kettle water by Tsugumi, before they began their usual food sparring.

“I was thinking of going to the record store today,” Hibari announced, “There's a new album from The Cure out I want to get. Probably one or two others I'd like to grab.”

The Oozora father nodded absently, while Tsugumi had a realisation.

“Ranma,” she said, “You don't have any records do you? I don't remember seeing any in your room.”

“Huh?” Ranma managed between mouthfuls, “Never really bothered much with music. I've got trainin' to do and such.”

“Spending too long listening to music makes you soft,” Genma grumbled, shooting a nasty look at Hibari.

“Nonsense,” the blonde countered, “Music is great for working out. A good beat helps keep you motivated. That's why gyms and fitness shows are always playing music.”

“Don't forget movie training montages,” Tsubame added, “Rocky for instance.”

Ranma nodded and thought it over, “Suppose it can't do any real harm. Can probably set a pace to music to practice speed trainin'.”

“You should go with Hibari then, my boy,” Ibari smiled, “Remember to keep him from doing anything too feminine while you're out.”

* * *

The small redhead was still dripping from the window cleaning bucket that had dropped on him. The angry yelling had only done so much to soothe his nerves. Hibari's continued chuckling wasn't helping matters. The water magnet skills were always amusing.

“Hey, are you girls alone?” a man asked.

“Where are you headed?” his friend continued.

“It's pretty hot today, do you girls wanna go somewhere nice and cool with us?” the first one added.

Hibari smiled. “It is pretty hot. I could really go for some ice cream. How about you, Ranma?”

Ranma heard the word 'ice cream' and began nodding reflexively. The men smiled and lead the two over to a nearby ice cream truck, buying everyone double scoop ice cream cones.

“Thanks,” Hibari replied. “Well, bye! We've gotta go.”
The men stared in shock, one of them losing a scoop from his ice cream. Ranma was impressed by the efficiency of the scam. He'd have to remember it in future, in case he encountered grouchy vendors who would give free food. Enjoying their ice cream he and Hibari walked off. The men the scurried up to the two of them.

“Woah, hey,” the one said, “What's the big idea.”

The other placed a hand on Ranma's shoulder, “Don't you think your friend is a little rude?”

Ranma glared at the man, “Don't you touch me pal!”

“Yah, back off!” Hibari joined in, “Honestly, harassing two young girls on the street! How brazen! Even grabbing one of us!”

The men stumbled back in confused shock, and the two teens with distinctive hair colours marched down the street. A number of passer bys gave the men dirty looks. Ranma was happy for the ice cream, but felt worried how much he and Hibari had been in sync. The two walked along towards the record store in relative silence. They'd been sent together in Ibari's eternal hope that Ranma's manliness would rub off on Hibari but it clearly wasn't going well, judging by the adorable expression of the redhead's face as he was finishing off his ice cream.

Once in the record store they encountered the sudden issue of Ranma having no idea where to start.

“What's 'metal' music?” Ranma asked. “Is that like... steel drums and stuff?”

Hibari began to formulate a reply, before realising that explaining every genre would take a very long time, and had a better idea, “I'll go ask the clerk if he can run us through a few samples. Give you the basics, then advise you from there.”

Ranma nodded and followed her, trying to understand what a 45 was, let alone a 33 1⁄3. However, when they got to the front desk their plan was interrupted by the wall behind the till collapsing. Standing before them was a girl in traditional Chinese garb, carrying two colourful chui, with long electric indigo hair. The girl turned to Ranma, red eyes glowing with hatred.

“Ranma! Kill!”

Ranma's eyes grew massive in terror and, without thinking, he grabbed Hibari by the hand and fled out the front door of the store (realising the record store had nowhere to hide and no room to fight). Shampoo was hot on their tale as they fled down the street. Ducking into an alley, Ranma scooped up Hibari and leapt wall to wall until they were running on rooftops. Shampoo scrambled up with similar agility.

“Darn it!” Ranma seethed, “That girl is one person I just can't deal with.”

“Why is she chasing you?” Hibari asked, clinging to Ranma's smaller figure nervously (wondering how much the effort of carrying someone taller was slowing him down).

“Heh. Pops and I kinda ate her championship feast. It was just after Jusenkyo, so he was a panda, while I was in girl form. I ended up challenging her since pops couldn’t. I was figurin' if I won then it'd be my feast. I'm willing to admit she was pretty tired after fighting in a tournament all day, but the fight didn't last long. I won, of course.”

Ranma huffed as they dropped to a quiet side street, and he set Hibari down, who then began running alongside him. Shampoo was still in hot pursuit, but Ranma felt at least here there'd be fewer bystanders at risk. Catching his breath a bit it was a little while before Ranma continued.
“So, after knocking her down I felt kind of guilty. I don't like hitting girls and all,” he huffed. “So I went over to help her out, trying to be a good sportsman. Instead of taking my hand to help stand up she yanked me down and kissed my cheek.”

“Oh, so she swings that way,” Hibari replied. “Then you dumped her and now she'll want to kill me for being your new girlfriend, right?”

“What!? No!” Ranma replied as he shook his head. “Why do ya always have to leap to the pervert options.”

“There's nothing perverted about it. A girl can like girls. Just how some people are.”

Ranma rolled his eyes (which, apart from his chest, might be the only part of him that got bigger when he transformed). “Anyway, it wasn't like that. The kiss was the Kiss of Death. If an outsider defeats someone in her tribe they've gotta give it and then hunt down whoever beat 'em.”

As if to hammer the point home, Shampoo had managed to get close enough to launch a leaping strike which nearly caught Ranma off guard. The indigo haired girl was also now in front of the other two, inertia nearly driving them into her.

“Ranma! Shampoo kill!”

“Killer shampoo?” Hibari managed to mutter. “Hopefully the conditioner sorts that out.”

The two martial artists ignored the yakuza heir and were quickly engaged in combat. Well, Shampoo was attacking, while Ranma was dodging and running around in circles, looking around for somewhere to hide. He caught sight of a loose awning, leapt up to grab it, and then tossed it onto Shampoo.

While Shampoo was tangled up for a moment Ranma grabbed Hibari's arm, and fled into the bath house he'd been trying to get to the whole pursuit. Unthinkingly the busty redhead dragged the beautiful Hibari into the men's section, both of them acquiring a large number of stares while Ranma leapt into the warm water of the soaking area, emerging his usual black haired and masculine self.

“Hey, where'd the redhead go?” a man asked, sounding disappointed.

“At least the cute blonde stuck around,” a middle aged man leered.

Hibari was about to give him an earful when a wall nearby collapsed and Shampoo marched in. A rather foolish man in his 30s gave her a wolf whistle, and found himself knocked unconscious by a chui in the blink of an eye. The indigo haired girl then muscled her way up to Hibari, who glanced nervously at Ranma.

“You!” Shampoo shouted, a chui levelled at Hibari. “Where is Ranma?”

“Pardon?” Hibari asked, glancing at the pig-tailed boy confused.

“You hide Ranma? If you hid Ranma then Shampoo kill too!”

She then turned to Ranma, noticing that he wore the same clothes as the 'girl' she'd been chasing. That raised an eyebrow on her. Reaching a hand out she felt his chest.

“Man,” Shampoo stated, disappointed.

“S-sorry to disappoint,” he stammered.
She then turned back to Hibari. “Where Ranma? No hide!”

Hibari was obviously too slow in responding as the warrior girl lunged at Hibari with her chui, striking the tile wall as the blonde barely dove out of the way. Further strikes followed, as Hibari was terrified to strike back and face the Kiss of Death too. When an errant blow nearly knocked out another bather (a surprising number having stuck around to see the two beautiful women fighting), Ranma found himself unable to stand by any longer, and slid in (he'd held back out curiosity on how well Hibari would do). A swift kick knocked one of Shampoo's clubs from her hand and it flew into the air. She lunged angrily at Ranma with the other, having not properly traced the trajectory of the first one as it landed on her head with a thud. The girl was out could, and Ranma saw it as a golden opportunity to flee, dragging Hibari by the arm.

The two teens collapsed with relief when they finally made it to the Oozora home's genkan.

“I think-I think we lost her,” Ranma sighed.

“Too bad you had to beat her as a guy too. Now she'll want to kill you however you see her next,” Hibari replied, panting.

“Don't remind me.”
Shampoo came to with a pain in her head like she'd not felt since foolishly trying to take on an adult warrior when she was eight. While preparing to curse Ranma for the pain her jumbled memories slid back into place and she realised it was not the diminutive redhead who had beaten her, but rather a handsome black haired lad. Who happened to have an unfortunate wardrobe. Shampoo sighed happily, overjoyed to be all but engaged to such a good looking boy. Then she looked around and realised he'd run off. Sighing sadly the Chinese Amazon wandered to the front of the mostly evacuated bath house, preparing to go back on the hunt. The blonde girl had seemed to know both Ranma and the handsome boy, and as such Shampoo was filled with hope that she'd find both her goals.

Reaching the front of the business she was surprised to see a panda walking up to the business, a towel over its shoulder and bathing supplies in hand. Shaking her head and blinking to make sure her eyes weren't playing a trick on her she realised it was almost certainly Ranma's pet panda. What luck. She strode up confidently, a large smile on her face. The panda spotted her and its eyes grew wider than she thought a panda's could. It let out a panicked snort before turning tail and fleeing. Shampoo chased after, knowing from experience the panda was slower and easier to track than Ranma.

Eventually the bear lead her to an impressive walled home, with a couple of fierce looking thugs guarding the front. They let the panda in, but seemed unlikely to let Shampoo follow. Preferring to avoid a pointless fight in unknown ground Shampoo found a nearby roof to hide on and try to work out the best entrance. Eventually she spied a corner of the multi-building estate which looked unattended and slipped in.

Sneaking along her nose was eventually filled with the smell of cooking, and her stomach grumbled. Having only eaten some rice crackers since leaving the ship the previous evening she found herself drawn to the smell, and had soon managed to sneak into the kitchen. There she found a woman of about nineteen or twenty with long dark hair cooking away. The girl seemed to be preparing a truly generous amount of food and Shampoo found herself entranced. Then the girl turned around, planning to double check her recipe book.

"Oh, hello," she smiled, "Are you one of Hibari's friends?"

Shampoo's eyes filled with panic at being spotted, but Tsugumi misread it as the more general panic which came from guests visiting a yakuza home.

"Perhaps one of Ranma's then?"

"Shampoo here for Ranma, yes. Also... black haired boy. Clothes... like Ranma clothes."

Tsugumi wasn't sure how Ranma could have a friend he'd invite back who thought he was a girl but figured that the girl had gotten in, so must have come in with Ranma. Shrugging, she gave directions to Ranma's room. Shampoo smiled, thanked her, and then headed off. Shampoo munched on some of the food she'd managed to pocket without Tsugumi noticing. A few twists through the hallways and she came upon what she was fairly certain was the right room. Taking a deep breath and preparing to draw her chui she opened the door.

Apparently it was the wrong room as a handsome black haired boy jumped to his feet from the bed. Shampoo's heart quickened with romantic sentiment (okay, more lust... but romance would follow right?) and she leapt at him with open arms. Ranma was confused by the move clearly not being an attack, and was thoroughly glomped when Shampoo collided with him. The crashing sound when...
the pair fell into a chair caused shuffling across the divider and Hibari burst in just as Shampoo grabbed Ranma's cheeks. A second later and their lips were together while Ranma's eyes grew comically in fear.

Hibari's eye twitched.

Shampoo finally let go and smiled seductively.

"Airen," she whispered softly.

"You didn't tell me the kiss of death was so... passionate," Hibari stated coldly.

"I-that-well," Ranma's mouth was fairly operational, but his brain was not.

Shampoo stood up and handed Hibari a small booklet. The blonde flipped through many pages of Chinese, recognising some of the characters, but not knowing the Chinese grammar needed to read it. She was about to give up when the Japanese section was finally reached.

"The laws of the Joketsuzoku!" Hibari read aloud, then began to skim through the rest. "Huh, so... if an outsider is female and defeats one of them she's given the Kiss of Death-"

"I knew that," Ranma interrupted.

Hibari stared at him with lidded eyes. "To continue: if a male outsider defeats one of them, he's then given the kiss of marriage."

"Wǒ ài nǐ"

"What does that mean?" Ranma asked.

Hibari rushed off to grab a Chinese-Japanese dictionary. "Ah, it means... 'I love you'"

The blonde's eye twitched again, and then Hibari flipped through the dictionary rapidly to give a response. "Ta shì wǒ de wēihunfū... I think?"

"You... oh wēihunfū!" Shampoo replied, before her eyes grew dark. "He now for Shampoo."

"You don't even know his name," Hibari shot back.

Shampoo's reply died in her throat.

"It's Ranma," Hibari said, smiling. Ranma's eyes grew with fear, not sure how the Amazon would respond.

Shampoo looked terrified for a moment, then gave a long reply. "Rènhé qǐwā míngzì de méiguī wén qǐlí dài hěn tián."

Hibari looked to Ranma and shrugged. "No way I can manage to work that one out."

Shampoo snuggled back into Ranma, causing Hibari's blood pressure to rise a bit more.

'Why should I care?' the blonde thought angrily. 'He annoys me every chance he gets. He flaunts that curse all the time. He's fool of himself. He refuses to admit his feelings. He's... adorable when he gets flustered. Honourable. And so amusingly loud about his masculinity it's easy to tease him right back. The first proper friend I've managed to make in years. And he definitely has feelings for me. I can see it.'
"What about your hunt for... er... the 'other' Ranma?" Hibari asked, hoping to get Shampoo to stop nuzzling the boy.

It worked. Shampoo shot right up to attention and turned to Hibari. "Where girl-type Ranma?"

"Closer than you would think," Hibari replied.

"Where? Shampoo need kill."

That shook Ranma out of his day dreaming. Having finally noticed just how cute Shampoo was he had felt quite open to her advances. The fact the girl wanted to murder him was very much a mood killer. The murderous glare also ruined the cuteness.

"In the house somewhere," Hibari shrugged. "I don't track 'either' Ranma's every movement."

Shampoo seemed reasonably convinced and stormed off to hunt her prey. Hibari then turned a judgmental eye to Ranma.

"So... you seemed a little too happy with that," Hibari replied. "What's she got that's so great? You don't seem nearly as happy when I hug you. Do I need to start trying to kill you too?"

Ranma glared as he stood up. "I dunno. Maybe having an actual girl pay attention to me is nice."

Hibari was about to counter (somehow... the specifics weren't clear yet), when Tsugumi appeared at the bedroom door. "Dinner is ready. I do wish you'd told me you were having a guest over though. Have to stretch the food a bit thin. No thirds tonight Ranma."

The three headed down to the family dining room, but Hibari kept walking into the kitchen. Ranma was confused, but just sat down to eat. Battling extra fiercely with his father before the rest of the household had even arrived, Ranma was caught off guard when cold water suddenly splashed over him.

"What was that for?" Ranma yelled, glaring at the blonde holding an empty glass.

"Oops, I guess I tripped a little."

In an instant Shampoo appeared, chui drawn.

"Girl type Ranma! Shampoo kill!"

Ranma yelped in panic and was chased out of the dining room, past a startled Tsubame.

"What was that about?" the brunette asked.

"Ranma-kun's new girlfriend is a little moody," Hibari pouted as she sat down to eat.

"Girlfriend? That hatred seemed rather convincing," Tsugumi replied, staring at the blonde she considered her brother.

"That's because she wants to kill girl Ranma," Hibari said and laughed.

The others stared confused, only broken from their silence when Suzume marched in.

"What did I miss?" the blue haired nine year old asked.

"What do you mean by girlfriend?" Genma asked. "How did he win-er, half win, that Amazon
"Maniac?"

"Apparently when a man beats a warrior from her village they have to marry him," Hibari related. "It's only the girls they have to kill."

Genma slammed a fist into his palm. "If only I'd known. Could have saved a lot of headaches in China."

"Should we call Suba and Seiji to help out?" Tsugumi asked.

"No," Genma replied. "Suba has proven a quick learner, but he's still not at that Shampoo girl's level. Seiji... simply will never have the speed. This is a matter for true martial artists, like Ranma or myself."

"I'll put a kettle on," Hibari said and shrugged. "I figure she's chased him enough to keep him from getting ideas."

Once the kettle was heated Hibari quickly tracked a terrified Ranma to the rafters of the dojo while Shampoo was hunting about outside. A bit of water and he was safe again, though didn't stop giving Hibari a stink eye the whole evening. Eventually Tsugumi convinced Shampoo she couldn't stay the night and things calmed down a bit.

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Ranma found himself relaxing against a tree on the edge of a field when Hibari hopped down from the branches above. The blonde smiled, before blushing shyly.

"R-Ranma-kun, there's something... something I have to confess."

Hibari slid close into Ranma's personal space and the boy was left awkwardly shuffling away on his back and elbows, not having room to stand with Hibari so close.

"Ya can confess, sure, but... but give me some breathin' room."

Hibari blushed again, "Ranma, the truth is..."

The blonde removed her loose sweater to reveal a full female figure. "I'm really a girl."

"W-when did you get to Jusenkyo?" he stammered.

Hibari leaned forward and cuddled on him. "I didn't. I've been tricking you the whole time. I'm sorry. It just seemed so fun."

"W-wait, Hibari," Ranma. "We shouldn't..."

Ranma's eyes slowly opened as he awoke from the very confusing dream, but he found that the sensation of a girl snuggling him hadn't stopped when he awoke. Groggily his eyes adjusted to the darkness and he realised Shampoo was wrapped around him just where Hibari had been in the dream. His eye twitched, angry at his subconscious.

'There's a beautiful girl in my bed, and my mind makes me think about a boy instead,' he thought angrily. '...Okay, so the girl wants to kill me half the time, while the boy wants... I don't want to think about that. Whatever my subconscious says.'

At that he began trying to pry himself out of the sleeping Shampoo's iron grip, only to have it grow tighter the more he struggled. Then the door to Hibari's room slid open, the blonde giving him a
nasty glare, before raising Seiji's squirt gun. Ranma's eyes grew in terror as he struggled to escape with greater urgency, but failed to move before the water got him.

At least the change shrunk him enough to slip out of Shampoo's grasp, but the water had also awoken the Amazon.

"Darling?" the girl muttered as she held a terrified Ranma's cheek. Then her eyes finished opening. "Girl type! Shampoo kill!"

Ranma fled down the halls in a panic while Hibari headed down to have breakfast. Tsugumi was already dishing out rice when the blonde sat down. A few moments later Ranma ran through the eating area, angry Shampoo on his tail.

"Oh," Tsugumi sighed. "They're back at it. Did she not go home last night?"

Hibari shrugged angrily. "I should probably get lover boy some hot water so we can go to school. With his marks he can't afford to miss classes."

"That's probably a good idea," Tsugumi replied.

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Ranma glared at Hibari as they changed their shoes at school.

"She managed to sneak in while I was asleep. You of all people should know how deep of a sleeper I am," Ranma fumed.

"Mhm, you're totally innocent," Hibari grumbled. "Not a two timing deviant at all."

Ranma stomped after Hibari. "You're calling me a deviant?"

Ranma found himself receiving the silent treatment the rest of the day at school. Half way through the morning he had decided to return it. He instead spent most of the day wondering why having Hibari upset with him was bothering him so much. Was he really such a deviant he wanted the Oozora clan's heir's affection? Once more he found himself repeating that mantra 'It's the curse'. Shiina was giving him dirty looks the whole day for upsetting Hibari as well, not that he cared too much.

Finally back home the silence of their walk from school was broken by an indigo streak that glomped onto Ranma.

"Airen!" Shampoo yelled as she tackled him.

For a brief moment Ranma felt a pang of attraction to the beautiful Amazon, until the image of her trying to kill him popped back into his head and he began trying to pull himself out of her iron grip. His complete lack of success came as no real surprise, but seemed to gradually infuriate Hibari with each passing second he failed to escape. Eventually the blonde couldn't take it anymore, and grabbed the glomping Amazon by the ear, tugging painfully.

"Aiya!" Shampoo shrieked as she let go of Ranma. "Nà shānhài!"

"Shanghai?" Ranma asked, though no one was listening.

"Straw-hair girl let go of ear!" Shampoo yelled.

"Straw-hair? How dare you!" Hibari hissed, but let go of the Amazon's ear. "If you stopped
assaulting my fiancé then you wouldn't get your ear tugged."

Shampoo glared back. "Airen seem not like you. Shampoo no like either. You try to get in way with boy Ranma every time... And straw-hair girl always hiding girl Ranma."

Shampoo's eyes drew narrow and cold before she continued. "You clearly obstacle. Shampoo not like obstacle. Kill obstacle."

Without a second of hesitation she drew her chui and lunged at Hibari. The blonde dodged past and ran into the Oozora compound. Shampoo gave pursuit, and Ranma hurried to make sure no one was killed. Shampoo had learned the layout of the home that day while hunting for Ranma's girl form (whom Shampoo had never seen leave the home, so she assumed was hiding somewhere) preventing Hibari from having much of a home advantage. A few thugs loyal to the Oozora who were on guard duty found themselves knocked unconscious by and angry Shampoo when they tried to intervene.

As Hibari reached the courtyard of the Oozora home the blonde turned into a defensive stance near the koi pond. A plan was starting to form in her mind. Maybe not a very good plan, but a plan nonetheless. Just wait for Ranma to get near the water, and the 'airen' issue would be fixed.

Shampoo smiled as her prey had slowed to a halt and she charged aggressively. The the Amazon's surprise rather than dodging as Hibari had only done before (fearing the Kiss of Death) Hibari ducked under an overconfident chui swing and struck the Amazon in the gut hard. Shifting back a bit Shampoo's face had a deadly smile grow on it as she realised this foe would actually be a worthy opponent.

In fact Shampoo had to admit her foe was marginally faster than herself, and nearly as strong. Hibari on the other hand was left scrambling, realising that Shampoo's technique was far cleaner and honed to kill. Ranma watched intently and would have agreed with both fiancées' opinions if he'd known what those opinions were. Over all the balance of speed versus skill left the two quite even for the moment, but as the fight went on exhaustion would cost Hibari's advantage faster than Shampoo's. Shampoo however was in no mood for patience and continued to launch mildly reckless assaults waving her chui around terrifyingly. Shampoo was furious about losing to one foreign girl and refused to let it happen again.

Hibari was turning the fight to get closer to Ranma, planning to distract Shampoo by tossing him into the koi pond (and possibly confuse the girl enough to get her to listen to logic), but wasn't having much luck against Shampoo's vicious aggression. Hibari decided to gamble, and dove for Ranma, managing to grab him by the hand at the cost of a chui blow to her free arm. The pain from the blow forced Hibari to cry out, and the enraged blonde found the strength to toss Ranma at Shampoo with her one good hand.

Confused by the projectile coming for her, Shampoo stumbled out of the way, afraid to harm her beloved. As Ranma fell just short of the koi pond Shampoo turned back to Hibari.

"You risk Airen! You pay!" she declared boldly.

Unfortunately for the Amazon, the distraction of dodging and then wanting to make a proclamation bought Hibari a chance to slide in, past Shampoo's defenses. A flurry of blows with her good arm connected painfully, and Shampoo stumbled back a few steps. The extra range opened her up to a number of kicks, followed by a leg sweep. As she fell her grip loosened on one of her chui, which a desperate Hibari pulled from her hand, and then used to hit Shampoo's other arm. The Amazon dropped her other club as pain shot through her wrist. She then found a colourful weapon in her face in the hand of Hibari.
"I win," the blonde said, hoping Shampoo wouldn't continue the fight. Hibari knew that it had only been luck that let her gain the edge.

Shampoo nodded, "Straw-hair girl win."

Hibari dropped the chui to the side, and collapsed to her knees. Then the Amazon lunged, about to place the Kiss of Death, when she found herself stopped by a hand grasping her shirt collar. Turning she saw Ranma was the one responsible.

"I think you're about to give the wrong kiss," Ranma told her with a smirk.

Shampoo stared at him confused, before turning to see an angry Hibari. However, Hibari's anger was now pointed at Ranma, rather than Shampoo, and the Amazon was deeply confused. Ranma pulled her back a bit, before moving over to grab a protesting Hibari's shirt at the waist. As the blonde struggled with her one good arm Ranma sighed.

"Come on, would you really rather she try to kill you than know the truth?" Ranma asked.

Hibari scowled, but with only one good arm wasn't able to stop Ranma from lifting the shirt, and instead the blonde was just left grumbling that today was the wrong day to not have a bra (but Tsubame had gotten rather good at preventing any undergarment borrowing lately...). Shampoo gasped as she registered the masculine chest of Hibari.

"B-but straw-hair gir... boy... fiancé of Airen? How can be boy?"

Ranma blushed, and began to stammer and answer, when he felt an angry one handed shove and stumbled into the koi pond. Angry and redheaded he climbed back out, ready to yell at Hibari, but was cut off by the blonde. Shampoo meanwhile seemed to have smoke coming from her ears as the handsome boy Ranma was apparently replaced with the hated girl Ranma.

"As you can see," Hibari laughed and walked over to Ranma, pulling his shirt open to prove the point (and get a little revenge). "Ranma's really a girl. She's simply as fond of the whole crossdressing thing as I am."

Shampoo's eye twitched. Then tears began to flow down her cheeks. The sudden collapse was enough that Hibari even felt sorry for the girl, and moved to comfort the Amazon, when suddenly Hibari found Shampoo's two hands on her cheeks. Then Shampoo's two lips on her own lips.

Hibari was stunned as the indigo haired girl stood up, still crying, and ran off. With a graceful leap she cleared the outer walls and was on her way.

Hibari was only half aware of Ranma examining her wrist, and muttering that it was probably broken.

Ranma headed into the Oozora home, and emerged a few minutes later accompanied by Suba and Tsugumi, who was carrying a first aid kit. As the eldest Oozora daughter was wrapping the painful wrist and agreeing a doctor should take a look at it, Hibari slid out of the stunned daze.

"She... she kissed me," Hibari whispered. "That was my first kiss."

"At least it was a girl, no?" Tsugumi said, smiling uncertainly. "Poor Ranma-kun had to have his first with a boy. Always worried what happened to him would happen to you."

Hibari drifted away for a moment, then replied. "I suppose Ranma and I are even then."
"What's that mean?" Ranma grumbled.

Hibari just sighed.

Chapter 7.5: Chez Tendo (aka the B Plot)

Kosaku stepped nervously off the train at Tokyo Station, wondering if the emotional mustachioed man his mother had sent him to live with would really be there. He didn't know who the man was, so wondered why his mother would ask him to move all the way to Tokyo to live with a stranger.

"Ah, Kosaku-kun," the tall martial artist known as Tendo Soun said happily, "What a joy to finally have you in Tokyo... If only it had been under happier circumstances."

Soun grabbed one of Kosaku's bags and led him through the station.

"We'll take a taxi to the dojo," Soun announced, "You're probably too tired to deal with the subway today."

Sitting in a taxi a few minutes later Soun decided to re-start their conversation.

"So, you're in your first year of high school, no?"

"Yes sir."

"Ah, the same age as my dear Akane."

"So, um," Kosaku mumbled, "How do... did you know my mother?"

"Ahhh," Soun began, his eyes filling with nostalgia. "We were young. Harue and I... it was a lovely time, even if she chose your father instead. I don't regret it though, I found my own wife not long after and enjoyed the years I had with her."

Kosaku grew wistful and pulled out a photo of his mother. He sighed as he looked at her face.

"I miss her..."

"I wish I could tell you it will get easier," Soun told him, placing a hand gently on the boy's shoulder. "Whenever you remember it will hurt."

The cab pulled came to a stop, and Soun paid the driver. Kosaku took his luggage out of the trunk and followed Soun into the home labeled 'Tendo Dojo' on the sign. As they crossed the gate a friendly young woman of nineteen with long brown hair and a maternal air was standing to greet them.

"Welcome home father," Kasumi said before bowing to Kosaku, "It is a pleasure to meet you, Sakomoto-kun. My name is Kasumi. I am sorry to hear about your mother, but hope you will feel at home with us."

Kosaku bowed back. "Thank you for your concern and hospitality."

Behind Kasumi a girl with brown hair in a pageboy haircut appeared with a predatory smile. "Not half bad looking."

Kosaku blushed, but also felt a twinge of fear upon seeing the girl. She was definitely pretty, but held a cold atmosphere about her.
"The name's Nabiki by the way," she said.

Walking around an external corner of the house, sweating in a gi, came a pretty girl Kosaku's age with long blue-black hair. She grumbled when she saw him.

"Daddy... why did you agree to let a boy stay with us?" she grumbled.

"Akane, please be nice," Soun begged. "He's an orphan, and his mother was an old friend."

"Hmph, boys are perverts," she grumbled and stomped off.

"Please forgive Akane," Kasumi told Kosaku. "She's having some issues with the boys at school. It's... tainted her views of boys in general."

Nabiki and Kasumi went back into the house, with Soun leading Kosaku up to a guest bedroom.

"Wow, those are all your daughters?" Kosaku asked.

"Yes, indeed. My three precious girls," Soun replied with happy tears.

"Having only girls really makes the place so bright and nice."

"That's mostly Kasumi's doing," Soun replied. "She's been the pillar of the family for so many years, since my dear wife... passed on."

They arrived at the guest bedroom and opened the door. The decoration was fairly spartan, with just a bed, a desk, a chair, and a closet, but it was enough. Kosaku flopped on the bed, happy to find it had a good mattress.

"After your travelling you could probably use a bath," Soun nodded. "The furo is just down the way, I'm sure you can't miss it."

"You know, that does sound like a plan," Kosaku replied with a stretch.

It was as easy to find the bathroom as Soun said and the tired Kosaku wandered in, though he was too tired to notice the 'occupied' sign. As such he'd removed his shirt, and was unbuckling his belt, when Akane emerged from the bathing area in only a towel. Her eyes flashed with rage as he blushed and tried to look away, too stunned to say anything.

"Pervert!" she yelled as she punched him in the cheek.

Kosaku was knocked off his feet and lay sprawled on the floor. Akane grabbed her clothes and hurried back into the bathing area to dress. When she emerged the orphan boy was sitting up again, rubbing his sore face.

"It was an honest mistake, I swear," he apologised. "I didn' think ta check. Never needed ta at home."

"Hmph, you're a boy. I didn't expect any different."

***

Hibari sat quietly in the restaurant booth fiddling with her cast. The doctor's had said it would be at least a month before she'd get the cast removed. When Hibari had told Ranma he'd just laughed, before returning with some foul smelling powder that he mixed in water. As she'd tried not to gag drinking it he explained it was some kind of traditional remedy a monk had showed him when he...
was travelling in the mountains north of Hiroshima. Ranma was confident the wound would be
healed in a week with a couple more treatments. Then he'd dragged her off for ice cream.

"Trust me, vanilla cancels the flavour," a short redhead said with a chuckle as he handed her a bowl
of ice cream. "I could tell by the face you were making you were still tasting it."

Hibari looked down at the adorable sundae and was surprised Ranma would buy such a thing, even
for her. Then she was even more surprised by the parfait in front of him (which did not seem long for
this world the way he was digging into it). The decor in the parlour was also quite pink and girly. No
wonder she was looking at a little redhead, rather than the handsome boy with black hair he tended
to be.

"How did you find out about this place anyway?" Hibari asked.

"Heard some classmates talking about it," Ranma replied with a shrug. "Supposed to be kinda
expensive, but I never pay for ice cream."

"So it wasn't really 'your treat' then?" Hibari asked, before sticking her tongue out in a playful
manner.

"Hey, I still did the flirtin' needed to get this. Last time it was you that had to do that. Though with
the cast you could probably do a real good tragic story ploy."

Hibari just rolled her eyes and ate some more of her sundae. Looking over at Ranma polishing off
the last of his parfait she couldn't help but find his behaviour adorable. It was honestly a bit
unnerving for the blonde, who had never had real romantic interest in a girl. Then again, Ranma was
still Ranma right? So he was always a boy. She found herself trying to mentally transform the
redhead back into his true form, and was left wondering if his male form had ever given quite so
large a smile as he was making now.

"Now don't get the wrong idea. This ain't a date. Just two guys hangin' out. Recuperatin' from a fight
an' all."

"Yep, that's us. Just a couple of macho dudes."

"Hey! Less complainin' or I steal some ice cream."

***

The next morning Kosaku and Akane were walking towards Furinkan high school in a bitter silence.
The boy had given up on apologising after the twentieth time or so, and was instead wondering if he
should run away. As they round the gate of the school Kosaku was stunned to see what looked like
four or five different sports teams, a few of whom seemed to have equipment from multiple sports,
standing at the ready.

"This is why. I. Hate. BOYS!" Akane shouted as she charged at the crowd.

The howls of pain where interspersed with requests for a date, which left Kosaku scratching his
head.

"If this is what the Tokyo dating scene is like then I might be in trouble for that bet," he muttered
under his breath.

"This happens every morning," Nabiki shouted from an upper floor window.
Kosaku nodded, and began to sneak around the edge of the fight. He apologised as he stepped on someone, but soon made his way around the chaos and began to head towards the school when he saw a tall guy with a bokken and a rose probably a year older than him lurking behind a tree. Kuno was preparing to make a dramatic entry as the fighting began to die down, when Kosaku addressed him.

"So, are you waiting for her to tire out before attacking?" he asked. "That seems pretty dishonourable."

Kuno seethed and pointed the bokken at Kosaku. "Who art thou to discuss matters of honour with one as noble as myself?"

"What's with da funny words pal?" Kosaku replied in full Kyushu accent just to annoy the clearly stuffy teen.

"Thou are a peasant who canst barely speak!" the tall would be samurai roared.

"Maybe, but at least I ain't hidin' behind a tree," Kosaku shrugged, before starting to head away towards the school.

"Halt rogue!" Kuno yelled. "Thou arrived with the fair Akane. Acting rather too familiar for thine own good. Perhaps thou needeth a lesson in manners rogue."

"Listen, pal, I don't know who ya are, but you're really starting to tick me off," Kosaku replied.

By this point Akane had walked over to find out where Kuno was, and face palmed as she heard the argument. She thought about interrupting, but then decided maybe Kosaku deserved to learn the hard way after the whole shower incident.

"Hah, so the cad has some fire in him. Ah, but I should introduce myself, as is customary," Kuno began, "I am Kuno Tatewaki, the undefeated rising star of the high school kendo world. Captain of the kendo club. Known to all as the Blue Thunder of Furinkan High."

Kuno paused while posing dramatically, as if expecting the declaration to bring forth thunder. The storm clouds had rolled into a different part of Nerima that day though. (Hibari had thankfully brought a thermos of warm water for Ranma after hearing the morning's weather report.)

"Uh, alright," Kosaku shrugged, "Sakomoto Kosaku. I'm just stayin' with the Tendos for a bit."

"Cur!" the tall kendo champion shouted, and he lunged with a strike of his bokken.

Kosaku tried to dodge, but his minimal fighting experience wasn't enough to keep him out of harm's way and the Sakomoto boy received a nasty wallop to the head.

***

Kosaku came to in the nurse's office, with Akane watching him nervously.

"I didn't realise he'd hit that hard," she said sheepishly as she saw him stir. "He rarely uses that much force against me... Honestly a little insulted."

Kosaku rubbed his head gingerly. "How did I get here?"

"Well... I gave Kuno a good thrashing, then brought you over," Akane shrugged.

"Oh... Thanks. I thought after what had happened you hated me."
"I still think you're a pervert," Akane replied. "But you were pretty funny how you got under Kuno's skin, so maybe you're not all bad. Still a boy though, so you're on thin ice. Anyway, we should really get to class."

Kosaku nodded and they head out into the hall. After climbing a few flights of stairs Kosaku was surprised to see a boy in a familiar bandanna. The boy also looked surprised to see him.

"I'm back in Kyushu aren't I?" he grumbled, "I swore it was Tokyo that was north of Sendai, not Kyushu."

"You're in Tokyo," Kosaku told the strange lad. "Nerima too actually."

"Wait, really?" Ryoga said with his face lighting up. "Haha! Now I just need to find Wakaba High."

"Wakaba?" Akane mused, "I think that's the school on the south-west end the ward. You're at Furinkan right now. A teacher could probably help you out better than I could."

Ryoga blushed, nervous about an attractive girl talking to him, but managed to stammer: "Thank you miss."

He then ran off, into a janitor's closet.

"Strange boy," Akane said, as they heard the crashing of various cleaning supplies.

The boys' gym glass had a moment to relax, and were watching the girls play baseball when Kosaku found a couple of boys sitting to either side of him. Both were wearing smiles that were a little too big.

***

"So, you're staying with Akane, eh Sakomoto?" the boy with fluffier brown hair asked.

"Er, yeah. Her dad is a family friend, so I'm staying at the Tendo Dojo," Kosaku replied.

"You lucky dog," the one with flatter dark hair laughed, "What I wouldn't give to see Akane all the time... Anyway, how long until you plan on trying to make a move?"

"What?" Kosaku blundered. "With Akane? She's not exactly boy friendly."

"That's true, Nabiki'd probably'd be a bit for fun. If you know what I mean," the lighter haired one laughed.

Then the one with darker hair leaned in to whisper a more explicit explanation of just what his friend meant. Kosaku blushed, and almost wished he hadn't known all those terms.

"You guys are as bad as my best friend back home," Kosaku replied.

"We remind you of your best friend? I think that's a very good sign. Don't you agree Hiroshi?" the darker haired one laughed to his friend.

"Indeed, should be the start of a wonderful friendship. I told you we wouldn't regret talking to him, didn't I Daisuke?" Hiroshi replied.

Kosaku burst out laughing, "Your name is Daisuke?"

"What's so funny about that?" the short haired Daisuke asked.
"My pal back home was named Daisuke too. I guess both your parents chose the right names," Kosaku replied, still laughing.

A baseball to the face interrupted Kosaku's laughter.

"Ooh, today is not your day," Daisuke commented.

Akane ran over to check on him. Sure, he was a boy, but she really didn't think he deserved that much beating in one day.

"I'm sorry. I wasn't aiming for you. Honest," she said. Studying the red mark on his cheek for a bit she came to a decision. "You're going to Dr. Tofu's first thing after school. Two head blows like that..."
Hello Hibiki

Students were mulling about, putting their shoes on and gathering their bags as the day ended. Ranma was planning out a lesson plan for the evening's martial arts training (wanting to toughen Hibari up some more) when the blonde in question appeared.

“So,” Hibari giggled while leaning into Ranma's personal space, “I was thinking, we should go on a proper date soon.”

“What? Why would I go on a date with ya?” the pig-tailed boy yelped. “How many times do I have to tell you the engagement thing is temporary.”

“Well, obviously it's temporary,” Hibari replied, which made Ranma sigh in relief.

Then Hibari winked and said: “We'll be married eventually.”

As Hibari leapt to hug Ranma he dodged and fled out the school's front doors. Hibari chased after, giggling. The look on Ranma’s face was always worth chasing him about.

“Ranma! Prepare to die!” an angry male voice bellowed.

Ranma had only a moment to dodge out of the way, as a boy his age in a rough travel tunic wielding an umbrella came crashing to earth. The impact left a distinct crater as the bandanna wearing boy stood back up. Ranma meanwhile had subconsciously pulled Hibari to safety.

“Dodging and running, like you always do Saotome,” the bandanna boy sneered.

Ranma just stared at the boy dumbfounded, and trying to place the face.

“Who's this?” Hibari asked.

“Uh... It's on the tip of my tongue,” Ranma mumbled. “He's, uh...”

“Have you had memory loss from concussions?” Hibari asked with honest concern.

“Ranma!” the lad roared. “I just want to know... how dare you run out of our fight!?”

“Uuuhhhh... wait! Ryoga! Hibiki Ryoga!” Ranma said with a snap of his fingers. “Hey! How are ya pal?”

Ryoga just glared at him. “You're ignoring my question.”

“Oh, right... but I waited 3 days for ya? You never showed,” Ranma replied.

“I got there on the 4th day! And you'd run away to China with your pops!”

“The fight was like what, three or four hundred metres from your house? Even you should have made it in three days.” Ranma countered.

“Do you think the four days were a pleasant stroll? I had to sleep on the streets!”

“Well, if you want, we can finish the fight now I guess. Seems a bit stubborn though.”

“This isn't just about that fight! As a result of trying to track you through China I've seen hell itself!”
Ryoga roared.

Before Ranma could respond Ryoga chucked his now open umbrella at Ranma. The pigtail boy dodged it effectively, though was slightly surprised when it returned like a boomerang. Ryoga then began to wave it about like a sword in his right hand, pushing Ranma onto the defensive.

“Wow, quite the fight,” a boy muttered to his friend.

“Looks like Ranma's losing,” the friend replied.

“For now. Dude is good at dodging. Bet ya 500 yen Ranma's going to win,” the first boy replied.

Hibari noticed a few similar sounding conversations around the fight as Ryoga knocked a tree over. There might be serious money to be made here...

“I bet Suba would know a thing or two about running a betting ring,” Hibari whispered under her breath. “If Ranma's going to get into more fights like this might as well turn a profit.”

Ranma closed the gap to launch a few kicks at the bandanna boy. Ryoga swung with his umbrella once more. The blow missed Ranma, but left serious cracks in the pavement.

“Ranma! I shall destroy your happiness!” Ryoga shouted.

“Happiness?” Ranma asked as he looked towards Hibari and Tsubame, “I can assure you I’m not happy!”

“If you’d go on an actual date I'd make you happy,” Hibari announced.

Glaring at the blonde Ranma dodged a blow from Ryoga. He then bounded off Ryoga’s head and landed on top of the school wall. Ryoga was left looking around in confusion, and apparently didn't decide to look up.

“Coward! Running away!” Ryoga shouted and then charged in a seemingly arbitrary direction, while Ranma was left scratching his head.

Annoyed grumbles broke out as people argued what that meant for various bets.

* * *

“So, Ranma,” Tsugumi began. “Why does this guy want to fight you?”

The pig-tailed boy glared. “I don’t know. At least... I don't remember.”

“Saotome,” the ever slick Suba said as he entered the room. “You’ve got a letter. From a one Hibiki Ryoga.”

Ranma opened it, unsurprised to find it was a challenge letter. “Dated for tomorrow... but with Ryoga’s sense of direction, who knows when he'll get here.”

Then Ranma’s eyes flashed with realisation. “The bread!”

“Bread?” Tsubame asked, as Hibari and Suzume also shuffled over.

“Yeah... The cafeteria lady in middle school was always throwing out the last of any bread type into the crowd. Ryoga was the second fastest in the crowd, but I always beat him to it,” Ranma declared with a confident smile.
“That sounds like a pretty crazy school,” Tsubame replied.

“Well, it was an all boys school. Lots of energy,” Ranma shrugged.

“An all boys school?” Tsugumi asked with obvious concern.

It took Ranma a moment to work out why she'd been concerned, and then the boy's face turned red. “That was before the curse! I was always 100% male then. It was a good way to toughen up. Something your pops should have done with Hibari.”

“Oh, he tried,” Hibari giggled. “It lasted a month and a half. Most of them were convinced I was a girl in disguise. Like half the class asked me out. One guy was pretty cute, if dad hadn’t pulled me out I might have made a move. He was a good cook too.”

Ranma almost didn't believe it, but then he remembered a few of the blonde's outfits weren't really all that feminine, yet Hibari always looked like a girl. Ranma tried to picture his fiancée in a proper boy's gakuran and the ensuing image seemed rather amusing. Hibari would seem too pretty for even the bishonen look.

* * *

It had been a few days since Ryoga had shown up and the lost boy still had not returned. Currently the petite redhead was facing a far more impossible foe. Sighing with frustration he slumped in his chair.

“Romaji characters are annoyin' enough in English class... who gave 'em permission to sneak into math class anyway?” he moaned.

“Would it help to replace them with more familiar Hiragana or Katakana?” Hibari asked from beside Ranma. Tutoring the pig-tailed martial artist was certainly proving a challenge for the blonde.

“Doesn't it have to be those foreign letters?” Ranma asked.

“No, they're just placeholders. You could draw a smiley face if you wanted, as long as you keep it consistent,” Hibari told him.

“Huh, I thought they meant specific things,” Ranma muttered, fussing with his bright red ponytail.

Ranma dove back into the math homework for a few more minutes, and actually made decent headway. Of course, it was Ranma, so a few more minutes was all he could manage. Having made enough progress he gave a full body stretch that pulled his shirt in a way that made it very clear which body he was in right now. Hibari responded with an envious look at the martial artist's chest. A stare Ranma misinterpreted.

“Like what you see?” Ranma asked in a sultry tone. Ranma figured that if he got the blonde more interested in his girl side than boy side that would make things that much easier to then push the blonde off to real girls. It might weird him out, but it was a step towards victory.

“J-just curious,” Hibari replied with just the slightest blush, “But I thought you didn't like that form? So why are you in it currently?”

“Oh... Well, I can concentrate a little better on stuff that needs a lot of sitting around,” Ranma shrugged. “I'm not sure why. Maybe it's just that running around hurts my chest a bit, so I don't wanna. I dunno.”
'And because you're less prone to invade my personal space when I'm like this,' Ranma added silently in his head.

Hibari thought it over, “Maybe it's the hormonal differences...”

“Dunno,” Ranma shrugged, glanced down at the homework, made a funny face, then looked back at Hibari. “Wanna spar?”

* * *

Between the tutoring to ensure he did decently in school and the martial arts training (which both Genma and Ibari thought was a good angle to toughen the Oozora heir up) Ranma was beginning to worry he was spending too much time with the 'crossdressing' blonde.

“It's gonna start rubbing off on me, I know it,” Ranma muttered as he walked out of school.

“What's going to rub off on you?” Hibari asked, having been rather closer than Ranma realised.

Ranma's mind raced for some sort of explanation when he heard Ken call out.

“Hey, that bandanna guy is back,” the raven haired lad was yelling.

“Hey, that bandanna guy is back,” the raven haired lad was yelling.

“He looks ticked,” Haruki added.

“Tell him I need a minute!” Ranma shouted before running back into the school.

Hibari meanwhile ran towards the nearest payphone to call Suba over. She'd been taking bets from other folks at the school about the fight all week (and a few bets about what day Ryoga would actually show up), and had been getting advice from Suba on proper bookie etiquette. Still, Hibari wanted the yakuza enforcer there if payouts went awry. She could handle any violence, but Suba was intimidating enough to flat out prevent it.

Hibari made it to the baseball diamond where Ryoga was standing just before Ranma ran in with a pair of plastic shopping bags filled with food. The pig-tailed boy rushed over with a smile on his face.

“Alright Ryoga, I brought you this to help patch things up,” Ranma said as he tossed a curry bread to Ryoga.

“What?” Ryoga mumbled as he stared at the bread confused. “You think this is enough to make up for what you did?”

Ranma sighed and began tossing more foods at Ryoga, who caught them with ever increasing confusion. Finally he was left carrying a large pile of breads and sandwiches, but had grown no calmer.

“How is this supposed to help?” he seethed. “Plus most of these are past their expiry dates!”

“Well, you did show up a week late,” Ranma shrugged.

“Stop treating this like a joke!” Ryoga shouted. “Bah, enough talking! Words can't express my suffering, only pain will make you understand!”

With that Ryoga charged, dropping the food and swinging his umbrella wildly. As Ranma proved once more to be adept at dodging the lost boy's face twisted into ever increasing rage. Snarling he popped the umbrella open and tossed it ruthlessly at his foe. Ranma had to stumble to dodge in the
face of such a ferocious blow, and was momentarily distracted as he saw the umbrella swerve off into the crowd watching the fight. As he turned back to his opponent to reprimand Ryoga for endangering non-combatants he felt a piece of cloth wrap around his wrist.

“No running away now, coward!” Ryoga hissed.

“I didn’t run!” Ranma countered, and jabbed back with a series of kicks.

As the fighting intensified Ryoga’s umbrella continued crashing through the school grounds, before digging a small trench and finally coming to a rest at the feet of Ken and Haruki. The latter boy decided to try to pick it up (who knows why... it just seemed natural) and found himself struggling.

“Yeesh, this thing weighs a ton!”

“Let me try,” Ken replied. He had no more luck than his brown-haired friend.

Hibari, who had been collecting some last minute bets, was curious as to just how heavy this umbrella could be and marched over to try it too. After struggling for a few moments the blonde could barely half lift it with both arms.

“Ryoga was waving that thing around with one arm,” Haruki muttered. “Ranma's gonna be in trouble.”

“I wish I knew he was this strong before starting the betting,” Hibari mumbled.

“I told you to do research first,” Suba said calmly as his strolled into the crowd (intimidating most of the students who parted around him). The cool gangster just smiled as Hibari lit up on seeing him.

“So, will you warn Ranma?”

“That wouldn't be professional would it?” Hibari replied sadly. “I can't interfere and run bets. Maybe this wasn’t the best idea...”

“Maybe you can't, but I can,” a panicked Ken replied, then turned to the fight to yell towards Ranma.

“Get away from that guy! He's got super-human strength!”

Ranma (who was still being held near Ryoga with one of the lost-boy's bandanas) gave Ken an unimpressed stare. “Yeah, real helpful advice while I'm basically handcuffed to the guy.”

While Ranma was distracted with talking Ryoga launched an open handed strike which Ranma barely dodged, though Ryoga’s thumbnail scratched open Ranma’s cheek.

“I’m bleeding,” Ranma noticed. “When was the last time you cut your nails? Seriously, letting them grow long enough to cut someone.”

“They’re not long! It-it was the strength of the blow!” Ryoga stammered.

“Yeah right. Long nails like that... pretty girly of ya,” Ranma laughed as he launched a series of kicks.

Ryoga launched a series of punches, which Ranma mostly blocked, though a few painful blows broke though. The Saotome lad countered with a leg sweep, forcing Ryoga to land on his one free hand, letting Ranma leap onto the other boy’s head.

“Can I give ya a hand?” Ranma laughed, as Ryoga's arm holding the bandanna twisted awkwardly to prevent Ranma escaping.
“If I needed the other hand I'd use it,” bandanna boy growled, before launching them both into the air from his hand on the ground.

“He launched them both with one arm,” a boy in the crowd muttered.

“I wanna change my bet!” a girl declared.

Hibari felt a rush of panic and turned to Suba for help.

“Once the fight has started bets are final,” Suba replied flatly. “We don't need chaos with every shift in the tide.”

The cool gangster cowed any protests from the students. Hibari’s family’s associates were why most students were happy to admire the cutest girl in school from afar.

Meanwhile, in mid-air Ranma managed to squirm out of Ryoga's grip and batter his for with a number of kicks. Ryoga crashed to the ground and then ran for his umbrella. Ranma launched himself into a flying kick. Ryoga reached the umbrella just before Ranma’s kick hit and managed a counter slash. Both blows struck true. The kick to the head left Ryoga stumbling back a bit, while Ranma had a gash on his chest and his shirt was ripped nearly in two from waist to shoulder.

“Hey! That was my favourite shirt!” Ranma roared.

“So upset about a piece of clothing,” Ryoga growled. “You're the one who's girly! No man would care about such a trivial thing.”

“Girl! Who ya callin' a girl!” Ranma hissed as he lunged recklessly at his foe.

A series of nasty kicks and punches were exchanged between the two before both parted to gather their breath. Both were panting and glaring when Ranma felt the first drop of rain. As more rain followed Ryoga hastily rose his umbrella for shelter. Ranma realised at that moment the umbrella in Ryoga's hand was the only chance to preserve his secret from the rest of the school (shorting of running, which he refused to do) and so launched himself at Ryoga, hoping to reach the other boy while the fight was still one between men.

Ryoga was taken aback by the determination Ranma held in trying to stay under the umbrella, and both boys were once more left fighting while holding awkwardly close. The overall proximity was not helping the rumours many in the audience had heard about Ranma's sexuality. Ranma was so desperate to stay dry neither the rumours Ryoga's similar desperation registered. The scuffling half grapple was broken when Ryoga caught his foe off guard via a punch from the hand holding the umbrella aloft, causing Ranma to stumble back.

While most of the audience had fled in the rain, the few who remained (mostly huddled under their own umbrellas) were filled with confusion as the muscular black haired boy rapidly shrank and had his hair change to red.

“R-Ranma?” Ryoga stuttered with confusion, “You...”

Ranma seethed. “Well thanks! Now the whole school's gonna know about my curse. Like just havin' the dumb thing to begin with wasn't bad enough. Well, we gotta be more than even now, compared to whatever ya think I did.”

Ryoga respond with a cold laughter. “You call that a curse? Having an adorable figure like that? That's not suffering... and considering the free show you're giving everyone, I think you're about to be the most popular girl in school.”
After a second of confusion Ranma remembered the massive gash in his shirt and scrambled to pull the shirt back together.

“So demure,” Ryoga laughed. “That curse really suits you! As guilty as beating up a girl might make me feel, I've got a fight to finish!”

With that Ryoga pulled several bandannas from his head and threw the razor sharp headgear towards Ranma. The redhead dodged as more bandannas swerved and spun through the air, and was forced back as Ryoga's bombardment continued.

“I still think you're bein' silly hidin' under that umbrella like that,” Ranma tried to taunt while dodging boomeranging bandannas and holding his shirt closed, “At least I had a reason to fear water.”

“I've got my reasons!” Ryoga roared as he launched a flying kick towards the redhead.

The two clashed in a brief blur of fists and knees one more, until Ranma lept back, landing near Hibari, who stood comfortably under an umbrella held by Suba. The blonde was busy trying to ignore the confused stares from those classmates still watching and hadn't noticed just how close the fight got. That left Hibari off guard when another barrage of erratic bandannas flew towards Ranma. Not wanting to have any bystander get hurt (and not wanting to risk Hibari's wrath if the blonde's hair got cut again) Ranma scooped up the blonde and jumped away from the bandannas. Suba however was left to his own devices. He managed to avoid the bandannas himself, but his umbrella was destroyed.

Leaping away to get the blonde safety Ranma eventually set down with his fiancée on the roof of a supply shed. It took a moment for both to realise how tightly they were gripping the other, and both blushed nervously before backing up.

“D-don't think I saved ya because of romance or anythin',” Ranma stumbled. “I just don't like the idea of seein' anyone get hurt 'cause of my fight... except my opponent of course.”

“Right,” the blonde sighed. Hibari wasn't sure if Ranma's excuse was genuine or not.

As both their eyes fell awkwardly Hibari noticed the redhead's shirt had fallen back open, and blushed with envy once more. Ranma realised where the other teen's eyes went, and clasped his shirt up quickly.

“If you weren't such a pervert ya might know more about the rules of a man to man fight,” Ranma jabbed. “Instead you're a weird deviant who don't even know how to be a man.”

“How many times do I have to tell people I'm not a pervert or a deviant or anything,” Hibari fumed, “I keep thinking that if anyone can understand it'll be you, but you just refuse to clue in.”

“I don't want to understand nothin' about your perverted world!” Ranma roared.

Hibari's eye twitched, just as Ryoga came charging into view. The blonde grabbed Ranma angrily by the collar while hissing, “Better get back to your fight then!”

With that the blonde chuckled Ranma at his foe, who was caught off guard by the redhead being used as a projectile (as well as certain bits of anatomy highly visible due to the redhead's state of battle damage). Even with how small Ranma's body was at the time the force as the two collided was significant and Ryoga felt his umbrella slide from his hand. Eyes wide in terror the lost boy fled over a fence before Ranma was back on his feet.
“Why did he run off?” a confused Ranma mumbled, rubbing his head.
The evening had been quiet. Genma had wandered off to the other end of Nerima, meeting up with an old friend for drinks. Suba and Hibari had spent the night counting up profits from the fight (it was declared a draw when Ryoga revealed his hydrophobia, a result few had bet on; as such the venture had made bank). Tsugumi had made dinner, as she always did. Ranma was left to work out in the dojo for a couple hours, then do his homework, and then wander the day out reading some manga before falling asleep.

The morning was similarly calm. Hibari was clearly still annoyed at Ranma for his statements the day before, while Ranma felt a need to firmly hold his ground on the matter. Breakfast was tense as a result.

“I agree with Ranma,” Tsubame stated. “If you want friends you need to act like normal boy.”

Hibari responded by just glaring at the brunette. “Yeah, that would work great at school. I wonder who would kill me first; the girls or the boys?”

Tsubame paled. “I suppose that's true. They'd probably crucify me and Ranma... and dad would be left so dishonoured seppuku would be the only way out.”

Genma choked on his food.

“I think you're being over-dramatic,” Ranma replied. “They'll be upset, sure, but murder? That ain't happenin'. Crucifixion really... and does anyone actually do seppuku these days? Apart from a few extremists?”

Genma's choking got worse. Luckily Tsugumi knew the Heimlich (considering her father's heart condition she'd been taking first aid courses for some time).

* * *

“So you've really been a girl this whole time?” Ken asked before Ranma could even walk through the door.

“It's a really convincing disguise, apart from not being waterproof,” Haruki added sagely.

“Everyone knew, I didn't see a reason to try and maintain the secret anymore,” Shiina informed Ranma (who was only now squeezing past the swarming crowd other boys), “Not sure why you're disguised as a guy again now that the whole school knows though.”

“I. AM. A. GUY,” Ranma fumed, while the whole class stared at him.

The response was a confused wave.

“Poor girl, her dad's really messed her up.”

“I'll treat you the same, don't worry.”

“You're so cute, don't hide it.”

“How do you do the height thing? Are those heels?”
“Why's the second cutest girl in the class gotta be a crossdresser?”

*Wham*

That last comment was not popular with the girls. The murmur surrounding Ranma was replaced with excessive violence for a few agonizing seconds.

“Second cutest?” Ranma managed to mutter.


“Well, that last bit is definitely true. I do get a pretty good rack with the curse,” Ranma replied smugly. “But I'm tellin' you guys, I'm really a guy. It's just I picked up this curse in China. Cold water turns me into a girl, but hot water fixes it.”

“Because that makes sense,” a girl with long auburn and a headband snickered.

Ranma's mind was racing, trying to figure out how to prove that he wasn't just disguising himself as a guy when the teacher arrived (just a tiny bit late). The pig-tailed boy let out a sigh of relief, knowing that class would buy him some time to think about how to better explain it. Right?

“So, Saotome-kun,” the teacher began, “It's quite inappropriate that you've tricked the whole school and snuck yourself into the boys' change room. We really must change your registration. I must say, I'm also disappointed in Hibari-chan for allowing this to happen.”

Ranma's eye twitched. Both at the accusation and his view on the situation with Hibari. The blonde was following the response with obvious interest.

“How can I prove-” Ranma began, until his eyes lit up with a realisation, and he yanked his red silk shirt off, revealing a toned male chest, “There! See! Male.”

The girls gasped, first at the thought of a girl taking her shirt off in front of the whole class, and then at what most saw as the very pleasant sight of Ranma's muscular torso. The boys groaned with disappointment for much the same reasons. Ranma gave them all a smug smile.

“B-but, yesterday... those were definitely...” Haruki started.

“Like I said: Magic. It's a transformation curse,” Ranma replied.

“Still, how do we know which form is real?” Ken asked.

“Cold water turns me female, hot water returns me to male. Wouldn't be much of a curse if the transformation only worked on the rarer type of water,” Ranma replied.

“Unless you really wanted to ruin someone's ability to have hot baths,” a girl with short hair and a baggy sweater shrugged. Ranma was momentarily distracted by the fact that the large English letters on her shirt read 'BOY'.

'Why would a girl wear a shirt like that?' he wondered.

“Well then... It is very upstanding of you then that you did not use your curse to sneak into the girls change room or restrooms,” Iwasaki-sensei nodded sagely.

“Why would I want to be in those? I'm a guy!” Ranma replied, scratching his head with confusion.

“And I was starting to believe that Ranma was a boy,” Ken said quietly to Haruki. “No real guy
would turn that opportunity down.”

Ranma just slumped into his chair and stared at the ceiling. The class generally calmed down as the teacher remembered she had lessons for the day, though eyes kept landing on Ranma (a mix of curiosity and the fact that he'd forgotten to put his shirt back on).

* * *

“Tomorrow's gonna be even worse,” Ranma mumbled as they walked home. “Gym class. Everyone has water bottles. Yay...”

“I thought you were firm on not having feminine modesty?” Hibari asked teasingly.

“That's different from not wanting to be harassed,” Ranma shot back defensively. “I like going casually without a shirt. I don't like being leered at.”

Hibari was about to reply when a determined little bluenette marched past angrily. Suzume stormed into the Oozora home, ignoring any greetings as she made a beeline for the kitchen. Unsurprisingly she found Tsugumi hard at work on dinner.

“Remember, it's got to be extra perfect tonight,” the young girl ordered.

“Don't worry, I remembered,” her eldest sister replied calmly, “I'm making sure it's special.”

“What's going on with Suzume?” Hibari asked as the blonde slid into the kitchen (Ranma close behind, also curious). “Ohhh... is it her first period?”

Tsugumi dropped the pot she was filling in the sink, luckily it didn't splash too much. Ranma grew a bit pale.

“No, no,” Tsugumi stammered as she filled the pot back up. “She just has some friends coming over for a study session, so she wants everything perfect.”

“Oh,” Hibari nodded.

“What's a period? Do we celebrate if I have one? Is it bad if I don't?” Suzume asked nervously.

“Don't worry about it,” Hibari replied reassuringly. “To tell the truth, I haven't had my first yet either.”

Tsugumi lost her grip on the pot in shock, dropping it. As it crashed on the floor the cold water inside splashed Ranma (and a decent amount of the kitchen honestly).

“How about you Ranma? Have you had your first period yet?” Hibari giggled.

The petite redhead seemed to lose all colour as his eyes went blank. A tumbleweed blew past and bounced off his head.

“Is that a yes?” Hibari asked.

“It might be possible that the possibility never occurred to him,” Tsugumi replied, before turning a reassuring face to Ranma. “If you do have one, just let me know and I will help you out. I had to go without any real lessons as mother had passed on... but I won't make you do that.”

The redhead had some colour return along with basic signs of life, but was shivering and twitching disconcertingly. Hibari shrugged and turned back to her blue haired little sister.
“So, are their any boys in the group? Or is it all girls?”

“Th-there's one boy,” Suzume said as she blushed.

“Oh! Little sis has a boyfriend!” Hibari giggled. “Do you need tips on seduction?”

“It's not like that!” the bluenette fumed. “He's... he's my sweetheart.”

“Ah, well, then you'll definitely need some seduction tips!” the blonde replied as she laughed.

“She's too young for that!” Ranma shouted, breaking out of his mini-coma.

“I suppose that's true,” Hibari admitted reluctantly. “Maybe you'd like some tips though? Can't rely on that cute figure of yours for everything.”

“I don't want to be dragged into that perverted world of yours either,” Ranma fumed and stormed off.

“Come on, I'll just give you a couple pointers,” Hibari replied, rushing ahead of the smaller teen.

Hibari flopped down in Ranma's path, lying in a provocative and seemingly helpless pose, giving the redhead bedroom eyes.

“Oops,” Hibari said, sliding the loose collar of her shirt down one shoulder. “I fell. If only a manly martial artist could help me up.”

Ranma began to blush as red as his hair and a bit of steam shot out his ears, 'That's a guy... And I'm a guy... But he's too cute... And am I really a guy right now? But he called me manly still... But a guy shouldn't want a manly guy... And-

The stuttering train of thought was firmly derailed when Ibari stormed open a door, glaring down at the child he considered his only son. The yakuza father had heard Hibari's statement, and was too enraged to notice Ranma was currently in girl mode (which would have shifted his view on the issue a bit if he had noticed it... though he would still have disagreed with the approach).

“How many times have I told you not to act like that!?!?” Ibari shouted as Hibari scrambled to her feet.

“I will not have my son acting so girly! Show some compassion for your father's weak heart!” Ibari continued to shout as he stormed after the blonde.

Ranma shook his head and pulled his still soaked shirt off to wring it out. He headed off towards the washroom to change back before the guests arrived, which involved walking past the genkan. He reached the front area about the same time as there was a knock at the door. A thug in casual clothing answered in aggressively, his head seeming to swell up frighteningly (though Ranma knew it was a classic illusion used by many martial artists that was also popular with more skilled thugs).

“Who are you three?” he hissed.

Three terrified children scattered away from the door. One girl with twintails managed to stammer: “We-we-we're Suzume's friends.”

“WHAAAT? You lot?”

A furious streak of blue shot up behind the thug, and as Suzume's form slowed enough to be seen Ranma suddenly noticed an oversized mallet in the young girl's hands. The thug was lying out cold beneath her and the mallet vanished as quickly as it had appeared.
“Impressive,” Ranma muttered to himself. “The sudden mallet technique. I'm still figuring that one out...”

“It's okay,” Suzume reassured her friends after she took a few calming breaths.

The three other children entered the building nervously, while Suzume smiled calmly at them. They noticed Ranma, and he just gave them a friendly wave. The boy began to blush bright red, which confused Ranma. Why was he blushing?

“Ranma! Your shirt!” Suzume shouted angrily.

“Oh. Right!” the redhead mumbled.

As Ranma pulled his shirt on quickly to sprint towards the bath Hibari ran into view with her father close behind. The mustachioed man attempted to remove Hibari’s skirt, causing her to dodge and slide into Ranma’s arms. Ranma caught her and received a tight hug as thanks.

“Take those ridiculous girly clothes of right now!” Ibari yelled, before noticing the group of children who now formed an audience. Nervously her turned to them. “Oh, h-hello there.”

Suzume looked ready to blow a fuse and she stormed up to her father, glaring at him with a look that could melt steel, “Daddy! You! You... You IDIOT!!”

The grumpy blue haired girl stormed off, leaving her father heartbroken and her friends terrified. Ibari hurried after his youngest, wanting to appease her. The other kids looked ready to flee until the calming maternal presence of Tsugumi appeared.

“Don't worry, there's no need to be scared,” she told them, smiling calmly. “Lots of folks look scary, but they're quite friendly.”

As if to prove the point the gorilla-like Seiji appeared and gave everyone a frightening but genuine smile. The fact that Tsugumi kept up her calm expression assured the children, who followed her to the dining room. There they found Ibari calming his youngest, who had at last stopped crying. Ranma (once more himself) and Hibari sat at the table near the younger kids, and Tsubame arrived soon after. Then it was just a short wait until Tsugumi returned carrying the food for everyone. (Genma was out with his friend Soun once more, which meant more food for everyone else.)

To Ranma's surprise Ibari suddenly cleared his throat and then clapped. Dark curtains descended over the open air walls of the room, while one of the closed walls opened to reveal a stage. Ranma had begun eating, so only half listened to what the yakuza father said about the play as Seiji and several other thugs marched onto the stage carrying sheathed swords. When the action started Ranma was surprised to see the blades were made of actual metal, but was still more invested in the meal. He made sure to avoid a rather burnt bit of egg that Suzume was trying to convince her ‘sweetheart’ to eat.

That conversation was broken when a sword flew out of someone's hands and landed firmly in the table between Ranma and the young boy. All three young guests screamed and fled the room. Suzume boiled over in under second and had a mallet in her hand once more.

“Daddy you idiot!” she shouted as she chased her father around the room, swinging aggressively.

“Her temper always flares up when she's got a crush,” Tsubame sighed.

“A temper like that’ll only be more of a problem as she gets older,” Ranma grumbled.
A half hour later Suzume had calmed down, and was hard at work on her studying when she noticed that her 'sweetheart' Katigiri kept zoning out and blushing. The blue haired girl gave him a friendly wink, like she had seen her older sibling Hibari do many times, but was upset to find the boy didn't seem to notice her.

"All of your sisters are so beautiful," the twintails girl said, trying to distract Suzume from whatever was making her grumpy.

"Yeah... and that redhead," Katigiri said wistfully. "Wish she'd been at dinner."

"Katigiri-kun is in love!" the second girl laughed

Suzume's face lost its colour as she felt her heart break. She tried to dive back into her homework, but found it hard to concentrate. The other kids were growing bored too and they decided to call it a night. Tsugumi, Hibari, and Ranma went to see them off.

"Feel free to come back any time," Tsugumi smiled.

"Thanks for having us," Katigiri replied.

"Bye-bye," the twintails girl waved.

"Bye," Suzume waved back.

Once the kids had left Hibari gave Suzume a friendly prod with her elbow, "So, how was your sweetheart? He was definitely cute."

Suzume just gave a grumpy mumble.

"Maybe practice your cooking a bit more before trying to make him eat any?" Ranma offered as an option.

"Ranma... You idiot!" the blue haired girl grumbled as she stormed off to her room.

Suzume slammed the door behind her, flopped on to her bed, and began to cry.

'Stupid Katigiri. And idiot daddy. And stupid Ranma,' she thought grumpily to herself.

Her pouting was interrupted by a strange 'bwee' noise. Turning a light on she discovered an adorable black piglet with a cute yellow and black bandana around his neck. He seemed completely confused by his surroundings, and looked up at the girl in terror. Suzume noticed her window was open, but still wondered how a little piglet got up to the second floor. Also what he was doing out, considering it had been raining on and off all night.

"Hello little thing, are you okay?" she smiled as she approached him, "Aren't you just the cutest little guy. My name is Suzume. Do you have an owner?"

She was surprised when the piglet seemed to shake its head.

"Aren't you a clever piggy," the blue haired youngest Oozora smiled, "Well, if you don't have a home, would you like to stay with me? I've always wanted a pet. I'll get you some food! Tsugumi managed to make leftovers today. Big sis' cooking is really good. She's been teaching me, but I'm still not very good."
A sleeping Ranma rolled over as a pajama clad blonde figure slid into his bed. Hibari snuggled up, and was thrilled when the sleeping boy rolled to hold the blonde in his arms. Enjoying the warmth Hibari began to slip back into sleep, hoping to enjoy the last half hour before having to start getting ready for school. As such, the blonde missed the quiet click of the door opening, and only realised something was off when a bucket of ice water splashed both figures in the bed.

Hibari was thrown from the bed as Ranma jumped to his feet, in just his boxers and undershirt. The redhead was disoriented for a split second, until he spotted his heavily built father.

“You're too soft boy! Snuggling with that pervert and sleeping in! My own son.”

“I wasn't snugglin' with no one!” Ranma yelled in confusion as he lunged for his father.

Genma dodged with the surprising grace he often exhibited, and pointed to a sleepy Hibari who was in the middle of standing up off the floor. “You think I’m blind? He was there in your bed!”

Ranma was distracted by a desperate attempt to work out how to explain he was asleep, and received a fist to the face for his trouble. Deciding to focus on fighting first and talking later he roared and began to chase his father loudly through the halls of the Oozora home. The loud battling woke most of the household (apart from Tsugumi, who had already been starting on breakfast and the night shift thugs), and only ended when Ranma managed to toss his father into the large Oozora koi pond.

“I prefer when you two spar in the afternoons,” Tsubame jabbed at Ranma as she drowsily sat at the breakfast table.

“It wasn't my plan,” Ranma grumbled. “Pops just has a bunch of weird ideas.”

A still damp Hibari flopped beside Ranma, which got a chuckle from the redhead. Well, it was meant to be a chuckle, but with his current form it came out as more of a giggle.

“Maybe that'll teach ya not to sneak into someone else's bed,” Ranma said, smirking.

Hibari just responded by sticking her tongue out. Ranma stuck his tongue out in response. The two continued to engage in a very mature battle of silly faces until a grouchy and sleepy Suzume stumbled into the room, carrying a small black piglet. The bandanna around the pig's neck seemed vaguely familiar to Ranma, but he couldn't place it. He did notice the pig was giving him a death glare though.

“What's that?” Tsubame asked as her youngest sister sat down.

“He's a little piggy who wandered into my room last night,” Suzume informed her. “He's very cute, and doesn't have a home.”

“I agree that he's pretty adorable,” Hibari replied. “But... how do you know he doesn't have a home?”

“I asked him if he had one,” the little blue haired girl said. “He shook his head 'no'.”

“Pigs don't understand Japanese,” Ibari said calmly as he sat himself at the head of the table.

“But he's so cute! Let me keep him!” Suzume begged.
The heavily built yakuza father was about to tell her no, but then he remembered how upset his youngest had been with him yesterday. Wanting to get back in her good books he smiled. “If he truly doesn't have a home. I want you to put up some posters around the neighbourhood. If no one claims him in a week, then you can name him and we will keep him.”

The piglet ignored Ranma long enough to nod happily at that. It then went back to glaring at the redhead, who had given up trying to understand the creature and instead focused on eating his food. Then the panda sat down beside him. The piglet's brain sped into overdrive, and suddenly he knew. Ranma would pay.

“You should probably give him a bath,” Tsugumi told her youngest sister calmly. “If he was lost outside he probably isn't very clean.”

“But I still have to get ready for school,” Suzume muttered. “I don't have time to give him a bath too.”

“I'm grabbing a shower before school,” Ranma said. “I'll give him a quick wash while I'm in there.”

“Oh, thank you!” the little blue haired girl replied.

Ranma gobbled the last of his food, then walked over to scoop the piglet. As Suzume went to hand him over the piglet lunged, and bit Ranma on the hand.

“Ow!” he squealed and pulled the piglet off. “What was that for?... Why am I talking to a pig?”

“Bad piggy, no biting.” Suzume glared with her trademark intensity, cowing the piglet slightly. “Ranma-chan is my friend. He's going to marry Hibari-chan and then he'll be family.”

Apart from Hibari (who smiled coyly at Ranma) the rest of the diners were stunned into face planting. The piglet however looked back and forth from the beautiful blonde to the hated redhead with clear confusion (and maybe a twinge of jealousy?).

Ranma just carried the piglet carefully by the collar to the bathing area, stripped, and filled the tub with warm water.

“Well, maybe after I clean ya up you'll like me more,” Ranma announced, “In ya go!”

Ranma plunked the little piglet in the warm tub, and felt something strange as soon as it was submerged. The piglet was growing. Rapidly. Suddenly Ryoga's form burst out of the water, Ranma's hand still on his head.

“Oh boy,” Ranma managed to mumble.

“Hello Ranma,” the lost-boy glared.

“Y-you went to Jusenkyo!?” Ranma screeched.

“That I did! I was hunting you across the endless Chinese countryside after you ran out on our duel. I finally reached the edge of a mysterious valley covered in small ponds and bamboo poles when you turned my life into true hell. Until this morning I hadn't realised quite how guilty you were, but now I know...”

“Wait, what happened?”

“You don't remember? I was standing on a cliff overlooking the valley when a giant panda came
charging out of the brush, nearly knocking me from the ledge. I managed to dodge, but then a furious red-haired girl leapt out, and launched off me to chase after the panda. I was sent tumbling into a spring, and was transformed into a tiny pig!”

Ryoga shivered at the memory, Ranma was doing his best to look compassionate.

“Then... then as I struggled in the water that same panda returned, and fished me out of the water. I thought I was saved, but he and some local man tried to eat me! I was only saved by the fact that they dropped me in scalding water. Like I said before, thanks to you I've seen hell! Now you'll pay!”

“Wait!” Ranma yelled. “If some strange girl and a panda did knocked you in, shouldn't you be hunting them? I know you don't have the best sense of direction, but I'd be happy to help you out. I still... why are you staring at me like that?”

“A redheaded girl, and a panda,” Ryoga repeated.

“Yeah? Pretty distinctive pai-ohhhhh,” Ranma mumbled as he realised the truth. “It was an accident! I didn't even know you were in China!”

“You'll pay! Die Saotome!” Ryoga bellowed as he lunged for the petite redhead.

Ranma managed to scurry away a bit, but soon Ryoga grabbed him by his bright red pigtail. Panicking Ranma smacked on the cold water for the shower head. Suddenly the angry boy was a much more manageable piglet. In his fury Ryoga bit his opponent on the shoulder, which got a satisfying yelp from the redhead. Ranma yanked the piglet off, and despite Ryoga's squirming the still human fighter's grip held firm.

“Listen. Ryoga,” Ranma glared, “I'm sorry man. I apologise from the bottom of my heart. I didn't want to leave, but I had only brought two days of food with me while waiting for our fight. Pops was able to drag me off because I was too hungry to fight him... And I'll help you find a cure. I've been trying to find one for myself, but your curse is definitely worse than mine... I almost can't believe pops tried to eat ya... So if we find a cure that only has enough for one person I promise, on my honour as a martial artist, to let you have it.”

Ryoga stopped squirming at that, and stared into Ranma's eyes. The pig-boy was sure it had to be a trick, but Ranma looked genuine. Ryoga decided maybe he didn't need to kill Ranma, but still wanted some form of vengeance. Ranma was glad to see that Ryoga believed him. In a different situation he'd probably have pointed out that following Ranma to China over the stupid bread feud was Ryoga's own fault, and Ranma felt he deserved at best half the blame (maybe more like a third considering Genma's involvement). Trapped in a Yakuza house, engaged to someone who confused the genderbending martial artist's sexuality even more than the curse alone did, and having had that confusion with Shampoo not to long ago... Ranma knew he needed to keep new conflicts to a minimum as best he could (he also knew that his best wasn't all that good).

“We can discuss my apology more later, but I have school to get to,” Ranma informed the pig.

Ranma set Ryoga down and then moved to start washing himself. Ryoga glared from the corner. At least until his eyes started to wander from Ranma's face and he saw certain bits of anatomy that left him feeling a bit confused about his sworn nemesis.

'Maybe I do need to kill him,' Ryoga thought, 'This is confusing... and wrong.'

Ryoga was very happy when Ranma hopped in the warm bath and emerged fully male.

* * *
Ranma sighed as he sat at his desk in the back row. The guys in the class seemed entirely too enthusiastic about Ranma's curse, especially as the rumours about Ranma's sexuality had only gotten worse. Rather than worrying, a number of boys now seemed to be hoping Ranma was interested.

“Class, I have an important announcement,” the bespectacled teacher declared, “We have another new student. This one is also fresh from China. Actually Chinese this time.”

Ranma raised an eyebrow, curious about the new arrival. The rest of the class was just as interested. The classroom door opened, and a handsome young man walked in. His hair was long and black, sweeping down to his upper thighs easily. His eyes were a dark red. He was wearing a green short sleeved dress shirt and loose white Chinese pants. More than a few girls swooned.

“He's almost as cute as Honda,” one sighed.


“Poor Liu-kun has led a truly difficult life,” Iwasaki-sensei began. Ranma knew better than to listen. Listening to the rest of the class seemed more useful than Iwasaki-sensei's naive imaginings.

“I still think he's the second cutest boy in our grade,” a girl whispered.

“Nah, Ranma-kun's 2nd,” another added.

“Liu-kun is mysterious and foreign though,” the girl from earlier countered. “Also all boy.”

An eraser bounced off that girl's head, and she turned to see Ranma glaring at her.

“I think your curse is an asset,” a nearby girl whispered. “It'd be nice to have a boyfriend who can be more understanding about the struggles a girl faces.”

“Nah, you just think that the curse means she has some nice assets,” one of the other girls countered. “Pervert.”

Ranma buried his head in his hands. The girls were almost as bad as the guys about all this. Hibari fit right in at Wakaba as far as Ranma was concerned.

“You're sure you don't know lightning magic?” Iwasaki-sensei was asking Shui.

“Very sure,” the confused Chinese boy replied, “Not know any magic. Some simple chi techniques, but no magic.”

“Too bad,” the teacher sighed. “Well, you should go sit beside Saotome-kun.”

Shui's eyes seemed to light up at Ranma's name, and the boy smiled warmly as he walked over to his new classmate. Ranma was a little uncertain about what that response meant, but looking at how smoothly the newcomer walked it was clear the boy was quite the martial artist (and he had mentioned chi techniques). Perhaps word of Ranma's skills had reached him already, and Shui was looking forward to having a new sparring partner. That made sense to Ranma.

* * *

Lunch rolled around, and as usual Ranma made for his secluded eating place on the school roof. Hibari was too popular to sneak off like that, which gave Ranma reprieve from his engagement issues. The rest of the student body meanwhile lacked the athletic abilities to reach the spot. Or at
least had lacked it.

Shui hopped up gracefully beside Ranma, wearing that warm smile.

“Tongzhi Ranma, have warning for you,” the long haired lad whispered as he sat beside Ranma.

“Warning?” Ranma asked.

“Joketsuzoku types have returned to Tokyo,” the boy stated.

“Amazons... yay,” Ranma grumbled. “Wait... how do you know?”

“They open restaurant. Shui’s father good cook. Get job there. Also hope Shui learn techniques from elder.”

“I guess that makes sense,” Ranma mused. “But if your dad is workin’ for them why are ya helpin’ me?”

“Shui hear about marriage issue. Shampoo girl, complain about complications. Tongzhi Ranma no want her hand. Tongzhi Hibari same.”

Ranma’s eyes widened with fear at that last bit. “So... so you know about... ya know... the thing-with Hibari...”

“No worry. Shui no tell about Hibari. Help tongzhi.”

Ranma finally remembered that ‘tongzhi’ was more or less the Chinese for ‘comrade’, and assumed that the shared love of martial arts was what made them comrades in Shui’s eyes.

“Thanks for that,” Ranma replied, “It's bad enough with some of the rumours about me. Then there's the curse. I don't need that getting out too.”

Shui nodded, and the two ate lunch quietly. Well, without talking... Ranma never tended to eat very quietly. As he finished up he noticed the long haired Chinese boy was smiling and blushing a bit.

‘What’s he blushing about?’ Ranma wondered, then an idea struck him.

“I suppose if ya can get Shampoo off her current plans that would free her up a bit... She is pretty cute, when she’s not tryin' ta kill ya. Good luck.”

Shui blinked in confusion, having evidently been lost in thought. “Pardon?”

“I'll even help train you. If she marries you that's pressure off me,” Ranma shrugged. “Shampoo would probably like that option too. All the girls in class seemed to agree you're nearly as handsome as I am.”

Shui blinked again, “Shui... and Shampoo... Oh no. Hahaha. Shampoo not really... Shui’s 'type'. That is right phrase yes?”

“Oh, too bad,” Ranma replied, “She is a bit psycho murderous. It's pretty unsettlin'. But cute.”

“Hmmmm... Yes... Shampoo nee-she need work on that,” Shui nodded.

Their conversation was cut off by the bell signalling the end of lunch. Both martial artists hurried down to gym class, reaching the change room in short order. Shui was blushing with a mischievous glint in his eyes, but Ranma just paled a bit and paused at the door.
“Ugh, right, I was dreading this,” Ranma grumbled.

“Why?” Shui asked, tilting his head slightly.

“The curse. And everyone in there having a water bottle,” Ranma grumbled.

“Shui block for you,” the new boy said. “Shui no need fear cold water.”

“Thanks,” Ranma replied, “I can probably dodge most of it, but it’d be nice to not have to worry as much.”

Shui was indeed good to his word, and between the two of them Ranma kept bone dry the whole time. The pig-tailed by did feel Shui had ended up bumping into him a little more often than needed, but had helped. Considering Ryoga might be wanting to kill him hopefully this friendship would go better.

* * *

Hibari was hastily changing out of her gym clothes now that class was over, as always hiding in the corner by her locker. She’d gotten very adept at changing quickly, but it was still a nerve wracking event every time.

“Ow...” a girl complained as she was changing, “I think I need a new bra. This one is getting tight.”

Hibari let out a sigh of longing, when suddenly the blonde noticed two girls sliding a little too close. The short haired one wore an almost aggressive grin, while the one with her hair up in a ponytail was feigning innocence. The two were of course friends of Hanazono Kaori, that obnoxious auburn haired bully.

“Eeep,” Hibari yelped and pulled on a shirt quickly. “What are you two looking at? Not being perverts are you?”

“Ah, but we're all girls,” the short haired Naoka laughed.

“You really do need more confidence in your body Hibari,” a smug Kaori declared as she pulled off her gym shirt in the middle of the room.

’Let's see just how confident she is,' Hibari thought with a smirk and slid over to pop open Kaori's bra. “Wow, I really could never compete!”

“Waah! Hey!” Kaori fumed as she pushed Hibari away, as her hand came into contact with Hibari's chest though she want into a momentary state of shock.

“Just ignore those girls,” one of Hibari's friends announced.

“Come on, let's get going,” another declared as they led the blonde away.

Naoka and the pony-tailed Michiko walked over to their stunned friend. Michiko poked Kaori on the shoulder.

“Flat,” Kaori blinked, causing both her friends to raise an eyebrow. “Hibari was totally flat. Flat as a boy...”

“Come to think of it, I've never seen her without at least a bra,” a voice declared just behind Kaori.

The all turned to see Inui Kenko, the muscle of their 'crew' standing there in only her underwear. The
towering girl's build would be mistaken for simply obese by those who didn't know her, but it was in fact a build like a weight lifter, with lots of muscle beneath. She was also the only full time redhead at the school (unless one was being very generous and counted Kaori's auburn hair).

“You don't have to prove anything by revealing yourself,” Naoka groaned, “But it is true, Hibari's always nervous in the change room.”

“Mhm, so she has a weakness. A total complex about being flat chested...” Kaori declared boldly, “Now we just have to figure out how to exploit it.”

* * *

“Come on, it's just basic balancing,” Ranma laughed from the top of a fence. It was another training session with Hibari now that school was out for the day, but the blonde wasn't very happy with this lesson.

“You could have warned this was the plan for after school,” Hibari grumbled. “I'd have never worn a skirt if you told me.”

“That's the point,” Ranma shot back. “You need to stop wearing skirts. It's just wrong.”

Hibari managed to hop up, and after balancing stuck her tongue out at Ranma. “You're just jealous because my legs are better.”

“They are not!” Ranma shot back, then found himself flustered as he couldn't figure out if that was the right or wrong response, so instead he just started running along the fence. “Follow if ya can!”

Hibari hurried awkwardly after, “Hey, could we go to Ikebukuro tonight? I have something I need to buy.”

“What?” Ranma asked, still not familiar with the different regions of Tokyo (though by this point he had Nerima mostly mapped out).

“It's just over in Toshima... that's the ward just east of Nerima,” Hibari explained.

“Yeah, I know where Toshima is,” Ranma grumbled. “Fine, after training.”

Hibari chased after Ranma some more. Hopping across alleys was within the blonde's ability, but crossing streets was still too much to do in one leap. Ranma was laughing as Hibari was hopping down to walk another street when a small grey blur flew at him. The pig-tailed boy barely dodged in time, and quickly found a gnarled staff flying at his face. Another desperate dodge kept him just out of the way.

“Hoho, good dodging son-in-law,” a tiny old woman laughed, “Definitely respectable, and worthy of my great-granddaughter.”

Ranma looked down at the woman who was so shriveled with age she barely resembled a human, “What in the world are you?”

“The name's Cologne,” she cackled, “Shampoo's great-grandmother. Want to test her future husbands.”

“I'm not going to be anyone's husband,” Hibari announced, having hopped onto the fence behind Cologne.
“You really are a pretty one, son-in-law,” Cologne replied as she gave Hibari a once over, “Even your chi and aura feel downright female.”

“Don't encourage him,” Ranma grumbled.

Cologne turned to Ranma with a raised eyebrow, “Ah, do you wish to be the more feminine one in the relationship? With your curse it's hard to see through to your inner aura.”

“Never! I'm a guy through and through!” Ranma shouted.

“That's how I prefer him too,” Hibari replied lovingly. Ranma turned an interesting series of colours in response. (Mostly red though.)

“Ho ho, this will be fun,” Cologne laughed.

As Ranma tried to shake off his discomfort with Hibari's flirtation Cologne poked him in the chest with her staff.

“In a couple days you'll both be rather more receptive to Shampoo's offer,” the old woman laughed.

Ranma rubbed the point on his chest the ancient woman had prodded, but couldn't find anything out of place, “What are ya talkin' about ya old hag?”

Cologne just bounded away laughing. Both teens where left watching the direction she'd run off in filled with confusion. Ranma decided it made a natural place to end the practice for the afternoon. He stretched a bit before heading to catch a train in to Toshima.

***

“I wonder if it didn't work,” Ranma mumbled as they stepped off the train. “I really don't feel any different.”

“Maybe it wasn't anything,” Hibari offered as they walked past some shops. “Just a confrontational jab?”

“Maybe,” Ranma muttered, feeling like he was forgetting something he planned to do that day.

He just sighed and followed Hibari into whatever shop the blonde was after. However, moments after crossing the threshold of the doorway he froze as he realised what sort of shop it was.

“This-this is... uh,” Ranma mumbled as he realised he wasn't exactly sure what to call it. “Some sorta pervert store thing.”

“Well, some of the things here can be used for perverted activities,” Hibari said and shrugged. “But I'm here for pretty innocent reasons. I just need some realistic padding.”

“Padding? What for?”

“Well, I got sort of groped today,” Hibari replied. “Need to be ready if it happens again.”

“What!”? Ranma blustered. “Somebody touched ya? Who was it?”

“Hanazono Kaori... she’s an egotistical jerk,” Hibari replied while poking through some of the padding options.

“Oh, just a girl,” Ranma nodded.
He then froze again and wondered why he was relieved. Or why he’d been ready to beat someone up for touching Hibari.

“Do these feel realistic?” Hibari asked handing some pads to Ranma.

“Why are ya askin’ me?”

“You know what boobs feel like pretty well,” the blonde stated flatly. “Probably better than me.”

Ranma quickly glanced around to make sure no one was watching before quickly poking the insert.

“Yeah, seems alright,” he whispered, turning bright red.

Hibari lit up and grabbed a few more the same brand before heading to the checkout line, Ranma nervously following. The line was short, but long enough for Hibari’s eyes to drift about, and landed on a nice dark blue piece of lingerie. The blonde began evaluating how well it would fit her and what modifications it might need in the chest area due to her... lack of chest when the image of a certain petite redhead wearing it popped in her head, the lingerie flattering Ranma perfectly as he posed seductively. Hibari blinked and shook her head in shock. As she moved to pay her purchase Hibari could only half pay attention, trying to understand how that image popped in there.

Sure, objectively the dark blue would match wonderfully with Ranma’s cursed form hair, and he did have better curves for it, but that wasn’t just a pure fashion thought. Not in that pose. As they walked somewhat aimlessly down the street (Ranma not knowing the area well enough to realise they weren’t heading anywhere, but he was starting to get suspicious) Hibari’s mind searched for what it meant. If she really had interest in Ranma’s cursed side, would she be the boy in that situation? Everyone insisted Hibari was a boy, despite the blonde’s best efforts to prove otherwise, and mother nature wasn’t exactly on Hibari’s side either. Was she just lying to herself?

“I need some of that nyannichuan water,” Hibari said calmly, turning to Ranma with doe eyes.

“You’re crazy,” Ranma grumbled.

“It would solve most of my problems, and a big one of yours. I’d be a proper girl and then you wouldn’t have to feel so worried around me.”

“You’d still be a guy, just like I’m still a guy. I’m also not going to help you to be able to do anything more perverted than ya already do,” Ranma replied, trying to convince himself as much as Hibari. (What was perverted about it? Ranma wasn’t sure.)

Hibari winced as if slapped by the words. The two stood in awkward silence, Hibari glaring at nothing in particular. Ranma wanted to take it back, but he knew it was what his and Hibari’s father would have wanted him to say. He was supposed to get the blonde to act like a man, even if it was getting harder to do each day.

“Go then,” Hibari finally told him. “You probably have better things to do than hang out with a pervert like me all day.”

Before Ranma could respond the blonde stormed away furiously and Ranma realised better than to follow. With a sigh the pigtailed martial artist turned back to the train station. In his angry mood he failed to notice the two girls who’d been watching the whole conversation. Kenko and Michiko knew that Kaori was going to be interested in that little conversation.

* * *
Ranma stumbled into the Oozora home, still in a foul mood from his fight with Hibari, and nearly tripped on a small piglet. After a moment of confusion passed as the memory slid into place Ranma remembered that he’d had some negotiations left with the lost boy and so scooped the piglet up. The furoba was thankfully empty, so Ranma turned on some hot water for Ryoga. Testing the heat he drew his hand out quickly.

“Ouch!” he yelped and shook his hand to cool it in the air. “I guess the water heater’s gone overboard or somethin’ today. Give it a moment to cool off before ya hop in.”

Ryoga ignored Ranma and scrambled up the tub (after boiling water he could handle a bit of heat, and really didn’t like being stuck a helpless pig). Sliding in it took a moment for him to transform, but the water wasn’t nearly as hot as Ranma made it seem. In fact it seemed barely warm enough to spark a transformation. Ryoga wondered if he was being messed with, but as he emerged he swore he saw genuine concern on Ranma’s face.

“It’s not that hot,” Ryoga stated.

“Huh, weird. Well, I can see you’re still glaring at me, so I assume there’s somethin’ more ya want.”

“You managed to make a compelling argument that I shouldn’t want to kill you, but there’s a difference between that and us being even.”

Ranma had to admit that made a bit of sense, but still wanted to get out of it. He snapped his fingers as he came up with what seemed like a good idea.

“You did kinda reveal my curse to the entire school. With my shirt ripped wide open. I’ve ended up being declared the second most popular ‘girl’ in my grade. That’s pretty humiliatin’,” Ranma pointed out (ignoring the small part of him that disliked losing first place to Hibari).

Ryoga nodded, a grin spreading across his face.

“I did get you pretty good with that one. Haha! Not sure if it’s quite enough though.”

“Well, uh...” Ranma managed to say before he paused to think, his mind racing desperately for something else he could offer, “I’ll make sure Suzume feeds you well? And, oh... Er...”

“I’ll figure out something else later,” Ryoga announced. “For now you’ll owe me.”

A quick splash of cold water and the little piggy wandered off to think of valid vengeance. Roaming the halls, trying to remember where Suzume’s room was, he came across a grumpy blonde stomping down the hallway. Hibari was carrying quite a few shopping bags from an expensive department store chain Ryoga half recognised the name of. Somehow the grumpiness on her face seemed to make her cuter.

“Stupid Ranma. Questioning my femininity. I’ll show him... somehow,” she grumbled.

‘How could Ranma do that to such a beautiful girl?’ Ryoga thought to himself. ‘He doesn’t deserve her! Wait... that would be the perfect revenge. Help out a beautiful girl and make Ranma suffer!’
Hibari slid open the door between her and Ranma’s room as the dawn light started to creep into their rooms. The pigtailed boy was fast asleep, and anything short of being tossed through a pane of glass probably wouldn’t wake him, but Hibari still chose to be quiet, stifling the urge to giggle. If Ranma was going to be so dismissive of her femininity she was more than happy to poke fun with his masculinity. Hibari quietly opened the make up bag she’d brought with her and began applying the contents to Ranma.

‘What colour eyeshadow? Hmm... I think a nice trendy violet would bring out his eyes. Oh, and if he gets splashed it would look nice with his red hair,’ she mused internally.

Hibari giggled as she finished up the mascara (as best as was possible on someone who was asleep) before slinking back to her room to drop off the makeup bag and then down for breakfast. She plopped herself happily down at her usual seat for breakfast and waited.

Tsugumi raised an eyebrow at the mischievous smirk on Hibari’s face, but decided to ignore it and finish preparing breakfast. She had long ago decided it was usually better not to ask. The rest of the Oozora family and Genma had gathered around to eat when Ranma finally stumbled into the room.

“What do you think you’re doing boy!??” Genma bellowed as he lunged at Ranma.

“What are ya talking about?” Ranma asked as he dodged and blocked a number of blows.

“I’ll not have my son galavanting around like that!” Genma hissed while unleashing a series of kicks.

Ranma leapt out of the way into the backyard and Genma gave chase. The two were quickly bounding into the air unleashing attacks with stunning speed.

“I don’t know what you’re goin’ on about, but you’re losin’ this fight old man!” Ranma boasted as a roundhouse kick sent Genma flying into the koi pond.

Ranma turned to head for breakfast when the angry panda behind him splashed his back with an impressive burst of water. The soaking redhead glared at his father before continuing over to the table and plopping down to eat. He only got a few mouthfuls in before he realised everyone was still staring at him.

“What?”

“Ranma... have you looked in the mirror today?” Tsugumi asked.

“No? Why? I ain’t a girl, I don’t care about that sorta stuff.”

Hibari burst into giggles, and Tsugumi couldn’t resist joining in.

“You really really should go look,” Tsubama declared.

Ranma grumbled, quickly finished his breakfast, and then hurried off to the bathroom. Sliding in front of the sink the reflection he saw was one of a young red-haired girl with stylish makeup. The violet eyeshadow was especially cute. The soaked hair and boys undershirt kind of ruined the look, but the makeup was still enough to make Ranma not recognise himself for a split second.

After the initial shock of finding his reflection cute (and not being sure how he felt about that) Ranma
turned on the sink to scrub it off. The water came out scalding.

“Gyahh!” he shouted and began to blow on his fingers to cool them down.

Hibari appeared almost instantly (holding a blushing little piglet in her arms), concern on her face.

“I didn’t think the makeup would upset you that much.”

“The water! It’s boiling!”

Hibari raised an eyebrow, but stuck her hand in to check. The piglet in her other hand started squirming, but couldn’t escape.

“It’s not scalding at all. Barely warm,” Hibari replied as she removed her hand.

Ranma’s reply was cut off when Hibari’s dripping hand (not dried off at all from being under the tap) made contact with a desperately scrambling piglet in her arms. In an instant Hibari found herself holding a (very naked) Ryoga. The shift in weight caused both to tumble, Hibari landing on top of Ryoga.

“Uh,” was all Hibari could manage as she lay splayed on top of the muscular lad.

“Heh, right. Was gonna tell you about Ryoga at some point,” Ranma muttered. He then pointed to the sink. “Can we get back to the hot water issue?”

“You’re a pig?” Hibari managed to say as she pulled herself away from a blushing Ryoga.

“Ranma knocked me into a Jusenkyo pool,” Ryoga replied, while desperately trying to preserve some modesty with his hands (and frantically looking for a towel). “But I’m really human!”

“It was an accident. We went over this,” Ranma grumbled while fussing with the taps (hoping to find a tolerable temperature).

“It’s still what happened. You and that dumb panda of a father.”

“So... you’re happy as Suzume’s pet?” Hibari asked. This was a strange thing to process.

“Erm... well, I... she’s very kind. It’s been a long time since I had somewhere with a roof to sleep as well. And... er... But I’m still a human. She just seemed so excited to have a pet I didn’t want to upset her. Kids. Ya know?” Ryoga stammered.

Hibari nodded thoughtfully. Then her face went dark.

“You not doing anything ‘ungentlemanly’ are you?” Hibari asked with a slightly accusative tone.

“What!?? NO! She’s a kid! I’d never!” Ryoga replied, pure panic in his heart. He couldn’t have Hibari thinking he was a pervert. “I’d only ever treat her like the little sister I never had!”

Hibari gave him a once over (which caused more blushing on both parties), but decided Ryoga was telling the truth.

“She had been bugging for a pet for a while,” Hibari conceded. “So if you’re no longer trying to kill Ranma then it seems fine. Plus you do make a very cute little piglet.”

The mischievous wink Hibari gave firmly clinched it for Ryoga. This wasn’t just about vengeance. A cute girl was willing to look past his curse. He was head over heels... now if only he wasn’t
naked.

“Hello! Scalding water issue here!” Ranma grumbled, having still not found a water temperature that could reverse his form without being too hot to touch.

“Ranma! Hibari! Hurry up! You’ll be late for school!” Tsubame yelled from down the hall.

“We’ll worry about the water later!” Hibari announced, grabbing Ranma by the wrist and leading him back to their bedrooms.

Ryoga decided the easiest path right now was a splash of cold water. Finding his clothes would be tricky. Easier to be a piglet.

A few rushed minutes later Ranma and Hibari were well on their way to Wakaba High. Hibari kept giggling when she noticed Ranma had clearly not washed the makeup off very well. The eyeshadow looked really nice. She was quite proud of her skills.

Suddenly a bicycle bell rang out behind them. The two teens turned to see Shampoo barrelling down the road towards them, the tiny old woman from the day before sitting calmly on the back of the bicycle.

The Amazons came to a screeching halt where Ranma and Hibari would have been standing if they hadn’t dodged.

“Nihao! Ranma! Hibari! Àirén!” Shampoo announced, beaming.

“Sh-Shampoo!” Ranma stuttered.

“Hello sons-in-laws,” Cologne said, “I see the Cat’s Tongue has already taken affect.”

“Cat’s tongue?” Ranma and Hibari asked in near unison.

“Your whole body is now as sensitive to heat as a cat’s tongue. Lukewarm water will be scalding, let alone water warm enough to reverse your form Ranma. If you want to be freed all you need to do is agree to marry Shampoo... both of you.”

“Never! I ain’t givin’ in!” Ranma declared.

Suddenly Shampoo leaned in, her face getting into Ranma’s personal space.

“How could you!? Trapping him like that... it’s cruel beyond words to force him to be what he isn’t!” Hibari shouted at the elder.

“It’s only temporary,” Cologne replied with a shrug. “Once you both agree to the wedding he’ll be free.”

The ringing of the Wakaba school bell brought an end to the stand off, Hibari and Ranma having to scurry off to class, though Ranma shouted that he would get vengeance. Hibari had just glared.

The pair were severely late when they got to class, and found themselves stuck on bucket duty.
Ranma was honestly glad to be away from the leering eyes of his classmates though. As the pair were standing bored in the hallway they were surprised to see Shui scrambling down the hall.

“Oh no! Shui is very late,” the long haired boy grumbled before noticing the annoyed looking duo in the hall. “Oh no! Cologne get you...”

“Yeah, didn’t even know until it was too late,” Ranma grumbled.

“Shui have good news though!” the handsome Chinese boy declared. “Cologne have cure in restaurant. Hidden somewhere, but Shui will find it.”

“I’d appreciate it pal... you should probably get in to class so the teacher can yell at ya for being late though.”

* * *

The day had dragged out slowly. Ranma could barely pay attention as he tried to figure out a suitable vengeance to get on Cologne and Shampoo. Hibari actually seemed more upset about the whole thing than Ranma was (and helped him wash the makeup off as soon as she could). Shui had been hard at work trying to figure out where the ‘Phoenix Pill’ that would cure Ranma was hidden. Probably. The notes Ranma saw him furiously jotting down where in Chinese after all.

However before the school day would end there was one last hurdle. Gym Class. More specifically the changerooms.

“I can’t use either of ‘em, can I?” Ranma grumbled.


“Only physically,” Ranma shot back. “It’s wrong for a boy to use the girl’s changeroom.”

He glared briefly at Hibari who answered by rolling her eyes.

“Then why no use boy’s?”

“Because they’d all be gawkin’ at me,” Ranma countered. “Which I ain’t comfortable with.”

“Try the nurse’s office?” Hibari offered. “It’s what I did for the first year of middle school, until I figured out how to change without giving myself away.”

“That’s an option? Huh... I’ll give it a shot. I just hope they ain’t gonna make me wear a girl’s uniform. Those bloomer things don’t look comfy.”

“It’s not that bad,” Hibari replied.

Hibari’s idea worked out and Ranma was able to change in the privacy of the nurse’s office. He was also happy he got away with wearing a boy’s gym uniform. Still got dragged into the girl’s activities though. Also got a number of comments about needing to invest in a bra.

“I ain’t a pervert, and it’s perverted for a guy to wear a bra,” Ranma protested.

“It’s also perverted for a girl not to wear one,” one of the girls countered. “Especially with a chest like that. The boys all certainly love the show.”

Ranma was left without a counter for that, and sat down on the sidelines in confusion. As he tried to work out what the correct path was a stern girl with auburn hair slid up beside him.
“Speaking of boys vs girls, I’ve heard an interesting rumour lately,” Kaori informed him.

“I ain’t really the gossipin’ type.”

“This one involves you. Well, more Hibari. See, we were wondering why her father would go and engage the girl everyone says is the cutest Oozora to someone in your condition. Then we all realised something unusual. None of us have ever seen Hibari without a shirt. She’s always so private. So, we really don’t have proof that ‘she’ is a she…”

“Sh-she’s just shy,” Ranma stuttered.

“Pfft. Hibari? Shy? Mrs. ‘centre of attention always’?” Kaori shot back, bitterness clear in her voice. “No... the question we’re left with is: what if Hibari’s actually a boy? And that’s why you two are engaged? That you make a fine pair of weirdos.”

“NO! That’s not it!” Ranma shouted back, panic setting in. “Hibari’s definitely a girl! 100%. No question!”

After shouting he wondered for a moment why he was being so protective of Hibari after being so insulting yesterday. Not wanting chaos at school was one thing. But this felt stronger. Was it suddenly being trapped a girl himself?

He then noticed half the class staring at him. Hibari was resting her face in her hand.

“Heh, that probably sounded odd out of context,” Ranma said to those watching. “Kaori here was just worried if my condition might be conta-er, catchable. It ain’t.”

“Er, right... Remember,” the gym teacher began, “Health exams are in two days. Be ready everyone! Now hit the showers!”

“Ooh, isn’t that convenient,” Kaori said as she laughed, “We’ll know for sure about Hibari soon.”

The Oozora home was a bit chaotic after Ranma and Hibari told them what Cologne had done. Suba and Seiji were sent out hunting for anyone who could help. Genma was pushing Ranma though the highest intensity workout the two had done in months. He was convinced city life was making the boy soft if Ranma let some old woman get the better of him. Ibari began quietly making wedding plans, now that Ranma might be stuck the ‘correct’ sex to marry Hibari. Tsubame was busy trying to talk him out of it (with occasional aid from Tsugumi when she wasn’t busy in the kitchen). A small pig meanwhile was trying to come up with romantic date ideas and remained mostly oblivious to everything else.

The blonde herself was trying to figure out a solution to the physical exam coming up. Ranma had told her what Kaori was saying, which she knew meant she couldn’t just skip like she’d planned. She was just starting to wonder if she needed to get Tsubame to fill in for her (the two sisters could pass for one another with the right makeup and wigs) when Suzume called her to the phone.

“Hello?” Hibari asked as she put the phone to her ear.

“Is Shui. Not yet find Pheonix Pill, but find some things maybe interesting for you. We meet after school tomorrow. Deal with medical thing. Can no say more when at restaurant. Old woman probably listening.”

The phone went dead before Hibari could reply. Slightly confused she decided to head into the
kitchen to offer Tsugumi help with dinner. Letting herself get lost in the joy of cooking (which always helped her feel more feminine, especially when near Tsugumi who radiated the stuff) Hibari decided that Shui had proven trustworthy so far, so she’d see how it went.

* * *

The household was wrapping up dinner when Seiji and Suba returned. Seiji was clearly excited and Suba looked cautiously optimistic.

“We’ve found a specialist in Nerima. Apparently he’s one of the top moxibustion and acupuncture experts in the country,” Suba informed them. “His office is usually closed by now, but he’s making an exception.”

“That’s very kind of him,” Tsugumi replied.

“He might be able to cure me?” Ranma asked.

“He said he’s not certain without a direct examination,” Suba replied.

“Well, what are we waitin’ for? Let’s go!” Ranma announced.

Hibari, Ranma, Seiji, and Suba hopped into one of the Oozora clan’s cars. The drive was thankfully quite short, as Ranma was so bursting with energy he could barely sit still. The car pulled up to find a kind looking man in his late twenties waiting for them. His brown hair was tied in a short ponytail, and his round glasses just increased his gentle appearance. He was clearly a bit nervous to be doing business with yakuza despite efforts to appear calm.

“So, which one is Ranma?” he asked Suba.

The contrast between the round warm face of Tofu and sharp cool face of Suba was striking.

“The redhead,” Suba replied.

Dr. Tofu nodded and led them towards an examination room. Ranma noticed the sound of the car engine as Seiji drive off.

“Hop up on this table. I’ll want to do a full examination of your chi and aura, if that’s alright?”

“Whatever helps me get fixed faster is good doc.”

The exam involved a surprising number of pokes and prods in odd places, as well as the doctor pausing to think things over a number of times. After about ten minutes there was a particularly long pause.

“You’ve got more going on than just the cat’s tongue, don’t you?”

“Heh... yeah,” Ranma replied nervously. “Ever heard a Jusenkyo?”

“It sounds vaguely familiar,” Tofu replied, nodding before hurrying off to grab a large book. After flipping to what Ranma could only assume was the index Tofu spoke again. “Ah yes, the pools of sorrow. You were cursed?”

Ranma nodded. Dr. Tofu mumbled something before flipping through the book he had.

“Ah... OH! Now that explains why you’re so worried about the cat’s tongue,” Tofu finally said after a few minutes of reading. “So... this is your cursed form then?”
“Yeah...”

“Hm.. That definitely explains why everything about your chi and aura is confusing. Yin and Yang both highly unstable... Unfortunately whoever placed the cat’s tongue upon you was a true master so there’s no getting out of it. There’s a counter that would allow you to take a single hot bath, but we should save that for an emergency,” Dr. Tofu explained, “I’m curious if I might be able to find another way to trigger the curse transformation. Due to the specifics of your curse certain materials known to throw off Yin-Yang balances might be able to set off a change.”

The doctor quickly pulled out a number of books and buried himself in research, leaving Ranma sitting in awkward silence. After what felt like an eternity Tofu mumbled something as he put the book down, then started digging through various cabinets pulling out unidentifiable ingredients of traditional medicine. By this point Hibari had slunk in to check out what was going on.

Tofu handed Ranma some sort of dried out... well Ranma wasn’t sure what it was. He felt like guessing it was part of a fish. Maybe? Then another item that likewise seemed to be a dried out bit of a creature. For some reason Ranma felt that one was lizard-y. Finally a rock of some sort was placed on his head.

“Do you feel anything?” Tofu asked.

“Strangely warm, and my throat feels kind of dry.”

“Hmm, yes. I didn’t think that would work, but it was easy and non-invasive. I’ll try a little acupuncture. If that doesn’t work though then there’s not really anything else I can do. Other remedies serve to produce long term shifts, which could be dangerous as you’ve got a quite healthy balance all things considered.”

Ranma soon found himself lying on his stomach with his shirt off as Tofu began the acupuncture process. Nearly an hour ticked past as he was poked and prodded, but apart from occasional surges or warmth, dryness, or the need to fidget there was no change. Tofu let out a defeated sigh as the clock hit 9pm.

“Unfortunately that’s the last technique. Only the ‘Tokyo Grandpa Point’ can do anything, but it would only let you take one hot bath.”

Ranma threw his shirt back on and grumbled while wandering into the waiting room.

Hibari and Tofu were left alone for a moment.

“I might be able to help you though,” Tofu said quietly to the blonde.

“Pardon?” Hibari asked.

“It’s no quick fix, but I have certain treatments that would eventually see your body better match your spirit.”

Hibari looked at the doctor with terrified eyes. “Y-you could tell?”

“Not by looking at you, but the readings I was using on Ranma were rather focused on gender related energies. It left me open to pick up oddities in your own aura.”

“I’ve looked into treatments,” Hibari admitted while blushing. “But what Jusenkyo does seems so much more thorough. I think I can last until I find a way to get there I want kids...”
“I understand. Still, playing with curses is a risky business. They might not want a willing ‘victim’,” Tofu replied as he led them into the waiting area.

The two emerged to find Ranma waiting impatiently. Suba meanwhile was calmly reading a magazine.

“Weiji is on his way,” Suba informed them. “We didn’t want to leave the car out on what’s really the edge of Oozora territory.”

Ranma flopped into a chair and began flipping through magazines. He was quite disappointed to find most were fashion or cooking focused, but eventually found a copy of Weekly Shonen Sunday to read. Hibari found a different edition of the same to read (to Ranma’s surprise).

The three guests read quietly for a few minutes while Dr. Tofu finished up some paperwork for the day. The calm was broken by the front door suddenly slamming open and as typhoon Suzume made landfall.

“Ranma-chan! Are you okay?” the little bluenette asked. “You were here so long, I got worried. I had to come see.”

“I’m the same as I was,” Ranma replied.

The grumpy youngest Oozora daughter turned to the doctor behind his desk.

“I thought you were going to help him?”

“I tried my best,” Tofu told her with a gentle smile.

Suzume glared at him.

“I’m sorry my little sister is such a handful, but she’s taken a liking to Ranma and worried about him,” Tsugumi explained as she entered the room, carrying a tupperware container.

“Oh, don’t worry,” Dr. Tofu replied, “I’ve got a regular patient or two with just a much energy.”

“Still, we’ve imposed on you quite a lot today. I thought I’d try to make up for it a bit,” Tsugumi said as she handed the container she was holding over.

Dr. Tofu popped it open to find a fresh smelling banana loaf. Suddenly he seemed as nervous as he’d been when they’d first arrived. Maybe more so?

“Th-this is much too kind, there was no n-need Oozora-san,” he stammered.

“Think nothing of it,” Tsugumi replied with a bow. Her kind smile made Tofu seem to only grow more nervous.

Suba suddenly appeared beside her. “Well, yes. Thank you doctor. We should head off now. Don’t want Suzume staying up too late on a school night. Right Tsugumi?”

“That’s true,” Tsugumi replied. “Good night doctor.”

“Oh yes. Well, please r-return sometime. It’s always lovely.”

The group filed out of the office in mixed spirits. Ranma’s hopes had been dashed, but he was trying to work out the correct use for that one time cure. Should he save it for a fight? With his luck it would last maybe 30 seconds before he got knocked into a fountain. Maybe there was a better
His train of thought was derailed a bit when the now overcrowded condition of the car resulted in Hibari seating herself in his lap. He was certain it would make more sense for Suzume to sit in someone’s lap. Or if one accounted for current heights having him in Hibari’s lap would also seem more rational.

“I think that doctor was trying to flirt with me,” a flustered Tsugumi said as they began to drive off.

“I suppose he wasn’t bad looking,” Hibari replied. “Kind of nervous though.”

She smiled as they rounded a corner and Ranma unconsciously held her in place.

“That’s why I said ‘trying’. He’ll really need to work on his confidence if he wants to ever get a girl,” Tsugumi said.

Hibari noticed a nervous blush grow on Suba’s face and couldn’t help but giggle a little.

“But you are right Hibari. He was cute...” Tsugumi continued.
Ranma sat nervously in the hall as his classmates prepared for their physical examinations. He’d been told he’d have to participate, but was going to be handled privately. It wasn’t his own exam that worried him though. He glanced over at the blonde he tried to tell himself he hadn’t fallen in love with.

Hibari had seemed strangely confident (and her skin extra radiant). Sure, Ranma didn’t really like keeping Hibari’s secret, it was the backlash of it getting out that scared him... at least so he tried to tell himself. Sighing he headed into the office where his exam was to be held.

It was honestly worse than Tofu’s exam had been. Lots more poking and prodding with cold metal. Ranma was half convinced they stored the stethoscopes in a fridge beforehand. The bright lights in his eyes were no fun either.

“Well, I’m not sure why the principal asked for your examination to be done privately,” the nurse said, “But you are an overall quite healthy young woman. I get the impression you were a bit malnourished at certain points in your youth, but seem fine now.”

Ranma just fidgeted uncomfortably at the appraisal.

“Puberty is has certainly been hard at work on you as well. If you don’t wear proper support you’re likely to develop back issues in the future young lady. I recommend getting measured first. Most women wear the wrong size when they try to work things out on their own.”

Ranma realised the woman was expecting a response, and awkwardly nodded. Why did he have to deal with this? Which kami had he upset? He soon received a lecture on female hygiene which grew longer and longer due to his blank stares in response to many suggestions.

He felt like he knew more about how to maintain his cursed form than his natural form by the end of it.

Finally dismissed Ranma slid into the hall and waited for Hibari. That Kaori girl and her friends emerged after a few minutes, all looking quite confused. Kaori lashed out and punched her ponytailed friend.

“I’m going to hit you,” Kaori grumbled.

“Why do you always say that after you’ve hit me,” Michiko complained, rubbing her sore and soon to be bruised arm.

Ranma just watched the small crowd pass by with his confusion growing ever greater. Just what had happened?

Hibari emerged only a couple minutes later, almost skipping as she left. She all but ignored Ranma while heading home. Ranma continued to ask the blonde for an explanation, but received only a few giggles on the walk home. He questioning was slowly silenced as he fell once more into slight hypnotism over the swaying of her hips. It seemed somehow more enchanting today and he had no idea why. Once they’d arrived at the Oozora compound Hibari finally spoke.
“If you really want to know how I did it, come with me,” Hibari told him, giving one of her mischievous winks.

Ranma followed the blonde, and grew nervous as they entered her room. Hibari quietly shut the behind them.

“So, are ya gonna tell me what happened? How did you get them all to think you were a girl?”

Hibari gave a dismissive shrug. “By being one.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

Hibari just giggled and then undid the buttons of her shirt. As the red dress shirt with multi-coloured zigzags fell open it revealed Hibari’s bra clad chest. That was not a male chest. Ranma blinked in shock a few times before leaning forward and poking Hibari’s breast to verify the validity of what his eyes told him.

“Hey now, you’ll need to actually take me on a date if you want to touch any more,” Hibari replied with laughter.

“Did ya take an overnight flight to Jusenkyo? The closest airport was still like a 3 day trek.”

“Nope,” Hibari replied as she pulled a small packet from her bag to and tossed it to Ranma.

‘‘Instant Nyannichuan Powder,’’ Ranma read aloud, “Where’d ya get this?”

* * *

The day before Hibari had followed the excited Shui into the back door of the Neko Hanten. The long haired boy was being a bit too mysterious right now for her liking, saying the excitement was worth it. As they moved through the kitchen Hibari saw a middle aged chinese man chopping some vegetables. His wispy goatee and dark sunglasses were a pretty distinct look.

“Hello father,” Shui said with a smile. “Have seen Cologne or Shampoo?”

“No... Cologne is out dealing with some paperwork, She should be back by the dinner rush though. As for Shampoo, I’ve not seen her lovely face since this morning,” the man answered.

Shui turned to Hibari with a smile. “Is good timing. No interference. Follow Shui.”

Hibari continued to follow the cryptic long haired boy. At least he’d worn some nice tight skinny jeans today so the view wasn’t too bad. (He tended to dress in a manner quite pleasing to the eye.) They hurried down the stairs and soon arrived at a bathing room. Shui filled a bucket with some water and then produced a small sachet which he tore open and poured the contents of into the bucket.

“Here,” he said, handing Hibari the bucket.

Hibari looked down a bit confused at the bucket in her hand. She knew Ranma’s curse was water linked, but still wasn’t quite sure what she was getting into. Shui noticed her hesitation and suddenly smacked his forehead.

“Sorry. Shui too excited. Forget to explain things,” he said, and held the sachet up for Hibari to see. “Is instant Jusenkyo powder. Exist for many springs. Guide tell Shui this when visiting. Each dose provide tongzhi one change, turn back with hot water like normal curse. Unless have curse already,
then next cold water wake up curse, because real curse stronger. So not very useful for those with real curse.”

“So... this water will turn me physically female until I take a hot bath,” Hibari said, staring into her reflection. She was half oblivious to the world as butterflies flared up in her stomach.

“Yes. Shui find three more packets so far. No Nannichuan, which no good for tongzhi Ranma. No find phoenix pill yet either. Still, this solve exam issue for tomorrow.”

Hibari held her breath and poured the water over her head. The world seemed to grow a bit, and for a moment she worried she’d shrink as much as Ranma. If that happened the powder wouldn’t help with the physical (even if it was still a wonderful thing). Luckily her clothes only grew slightly looser. Apart from her bra which suddenly felt very tight. Reaching to adjust it she realised the tightness was mostly due to the pads that had previously been filling it and let out a disappointed sigh. Sure, plausibility meant that a smaller chest was useful and she knew Tsubame’s figure wasn’t exactly competitive with Ranma’s, but she’d gotten her hopes up.

Still, this was a wonderful sensation.

Hibari leapt over and grasped Shui in the tightest squeeze she could manage. She giggled for a moment when she realised that the move closely imitated Shui’s Amazon coworker. Shui seemed to melt a bit under the pressure.

“I owe you a million Shui. How can I repay you?” Hibari asked. Her voice sounded rather shrill, and she realised she was still pushing the pitch upwards as she always did.

“M-maybe a date?” the Chinese boy replied, looking rather nervous.

“A date? You really-Even though you know... Yes!” Hibari replied, happily brushing her bangs from her eyes.

Her bangs that were now the wrong colour.

* * *

“Your hair still looks blonde to me?” Ranma asked, interrupting Hibari’s retelling of the previous days events. He also rather wanted to object to the date idea, yet also didn’t want to admit to objecting.

“Haha, no. This is just a wig,” Hibari replied.

“Why do ya have a wig on hand that perfectly matches your own hair?”

“Sometimes I ask Tsubame to fill in for me on something. We’ve got a wig that matches her hair too for when I’ve filled in for her.”

Ranma was more than a little surprised to learn that. Hibari and Tsubame hadn’t seemed to get along very well in his experience, but maybe their sibling relationship weren’t to different his own attitude towards his father: always fighting, but still willing to help out when it really came down to it.

“So what colour did your hair turn?”

Hibari replied by smiling and pulling off the wig. Beneath was a head of red hair. Not as vibrant as Ranma’s fire truck red, but still definitely red.
“Huh, so the Nyannichuan just turns everyone’s hair red,” Ranma commented.

“Not according to Shui,” Hibari replied, shrugging. “It varies from person to person. Probably genetic? It is cute that we match though.” He watched her face light up as she hurried off to a dresser. As she crouched down to open a drawer Ranma could say for certain that while not much had changed on her chest she’d definitely picked up hips closer to Tsugumi’s.

Ranma didn’t really know what to say. Hibari as a total girl was a bit too much for him. He was about to admit to things he didn’t like the idea of admitting. There was only one defense left.

“Of course, you’re still pretty flat chested. Also a twig. So I’ve still got ya beat in the figure department.”

Hibari was busy digging through her dresser when she froze at those words. Turning she shot an icy glare at Ranma.

“I’m cuter though,” she replied, sticking her tongue out.

“We’ll need a neutral judge on that,” Ranma insisted.

Hibari then pulled the article of clothing she was looking for from the dresser. It was a long sleeved blue silk shirt, the style overall similar to Ranma’s preferred shirts (apart for what looked like three red strawberries sitting on the left breast).

“You should go get your blue shirt. We can match and annoy everyone.”

Ranma hesitated at the door between their rooms for a moment. Did he really want to get involved in Hibari’s scheme? Looking back at the blonde-turned-redhead Ranma knew the answer was yes. They were at least friends, against all odds (more if Ranma was being honest with himself... but he wasn’t). As Hibari removed began changing shirts Ranma blushed and hurried over to his own dresser.

Ranma pulled off his own shirt while digging for the new one.

‘I shouldn’t be blushing. We’re both boys,’ Ranma thought to himself. Though he found his eyes involuntarily drawn to his mirror. ‘Or are we both girls right now?’

The two redheads with matching hairstyles and similar outfits arrived at the dinner table a short time later. All eyes were on Hibari’s hair, which she found amusing. Tsugumi tried her best to brace for whatever chaos was about to break out (she’d always found it better to stay on the edge of Hibari’s chaos to be the stabilising influence, and with Ranma’s chaos added on she’d found herself turning into an expert at calm out of necessity). Genma and Ibari exchanged cheerful glances.

“Haha, I told you Ranma would start to be a good influence on your boy,” Genma announced with a laugh.

“I wasn’t expecting him to copy so closely,” Ibari replied. He then turned to Hibari. “Certainly didn’t expect you to dye your hair. Still need to lose the padded bra though.”

“My bra isn’t padded,” Hibari objected (while protecting her bowl from Genma and Ranma’s eternal food battle).

“So not only are you being a pervert, you’re also lying?” Tsubame asked, leaning over and poking Hibari in the chest. “That feels really realistic...”
Tsubame then pinched her ‘brother’ ‘s chest to test just how realistic whatever was down Hibari’s shirt was.

“Ow!” Hibari yelped, slapping her sister’s hand away.

“Quit messing around!” the mustachioed Ibari declared, pouncing over at his second youngest child and yanking at her shirt.

The loose clasps of what was really a pyjama shirt burst open, revealing Hibari’s Nyannichuan enhanced chest to all at the table.

“What... no,” Ibari muttered before his eyes glazed over and he began clutching his chest, “And the white crocodiles!”

The yakuza leader collapsed twitching, causing Suba and Seiji to burst in. All of the other diners sat in stunned silence (apart from Tsugumi who had her eyes closed to think about how calming her illustration work tonight would feel... maybe she should take up meditation too?). Hibari then looked at the gawking faces and shrugged.

“You guys said I should use Ranma as a role model.”

Genma shot Ranma a cold glare. “Ranma, did you somehow-er, do this?”

“It wasn’t me,” the shorter redhead objected. “It was a guy at school who’s staying with the Amazons. He’s a martial artist too, and decided to help Hibari out with the medical exams we had today. Got some instant powder thing. Means a one time change.”

Genma’s eye twitched. Ranma had gotten better since the curse, dropping enough of that overly soft heart of his to be tolerable to Genma. Just generally pushing himself harder to be manly. Yet Hibari sat there in a bra and a smug grin.

‘That blonde boy is going to drive me mad,’ Genma thought to himself. ‘And might just undo all the effort I’ve put in to make Ranma an acceptable son.’

“Ranma, it’s time for sparring,” Genma announced as he stood suddenly.

Ranma was stunned. Mostly because Genma had barely eaten one bowl of dinner. The younger Saotome had casually enjoyed his meal while the household fell apart (and didn’t need to eat quite as much while stuck in girl form) so leaving the table wasn’t too bad for him.

“Can I join you two?” Hibari asked.

“If you want to play at being a girl then I have no interest in training you,” Genma declared.

Ranma just gave Hibari an awkward shrug before following his father into the backyard. The two bowed and adopted fighting stances. Genma unleashed a fury of punches fast enough that Ranma could barely block them all. Ranma countered with a leg sweep the older martial artist swiftly dodged.

“You’d better not be letting that deviant influence you Ranma,” Genma shouted as his roundhouse just barely missed the small figure of his opponent.

“I ain’t doin’ anything girly,” Ranma grumbled as attempted a leaping punch. “But maybe this’ll be good for him? Let him get it all out of his system.”
Genma had to nod sagely as he dodged a number of blows from Ranma. That might just make sense. Genma’s whole philosophy in life was about adaptability and trying new angles.

“Well, I suppose it’s worth a shot. I want you to keep a close eye on him though, got that?” Genma ordered, while attempting an uppercut.

“Yeah, yeah,” Ranma said while deftly deflecting the blow.

The two Saotomes provided the Oozora gang thugs another forty minutes of entertainment as they sparred. Finally Ranma knocked his father into the koi pond and declared victory over the panda who emerged.

The small busty redhead then marched off for a bath. Sure, he couldn’t enjoy a nice warm soak, but still needed to clean the sweat off. As he slid the door to the washroom open he froze with fear.

Hibari stood there, her shirt removed and her pants halfway off. She noticed him and raised an eyebrow. A quick once over revealed she’d clearly avoided any hot water so far. Ranma closed the door slowly.

“S-sorry,” he announced to the closed door.

A moment later Hibari had cracked it back open, and was peaking out at him.

“What are you sorry for? There’s enough room for us both.”

“I... but-er,” Ranma began to protest. He didn’t have a coherent response.

“We’re both sort of girls right now, so there’s nothing wrong with it,” Hibari stated with a giggle.

“No we ain’t,” Ranma replied with a harumph. The expression seemed adorable on his small build.

“So... then we’re both boys? There’s nothing wrong with it that way either,” Hibari countered.

Ranma realised he couldn’t argue out of either option. Instead he begrudgingly complied, and went in for his bath. They both entered the bathing area with its distinctly traditional and wooden design. (An odd contrast from how modern much of the home was. Especially the mostly concrete dojo.)

The two quietly lathered up. Ranma then raised an eyebrow when he noticed Hibari produce a razor and begin shaving her legs.

“Do you usually do that?”

“Huh?” Hibari was a bit slow to respond, having been a bit lost in concentration. “Well, yeah. I always shave my arms and legs.”

Ranma nodded to himself. Hibari had always seemed silky smooth yet somehow Ranma had assumed it was natural hairlessness. Ranma’s eyes strayed to his own legs and the hair growing there for a moment. Ranma shook his head and continued bathing for a bit, shivering whenever he dumped a cold bucket on his head. He didn’t like the cold, especially not in his smaller form which got cold so much more easily.

“I’ll scrub your back if you scrub mine,” Hibari suddenly offered.

Ranma was briefly filled with fear to have her turned completely towards him. The pigtailed martial artist had to mentally reassure himself that his own figure was better, so there was no need to be fluster.
“Yeah. Sure,” he managed to reply and turned to face the door.

Ranma had to admit Hibari was good at scrubbing. Firm yet gentle enough. He was truly getting used to the sensation of the back rub as it ended. A bit disappointed Ranma turned around and returned the favour. He was worried about not being able to return as pleasant a cleaning as Hibari had provided. Then his fiancée let out a moan of pleasure that shot a jolt through Ranma and caused his pigtail to stand on end. Flustered, he scrambled to finish. Hibari was disappointed in how quickly he finished, but accepted, rinsed off quickly, and headed out to the main bathroom. Ranma supposed he wasn’t actually that surprised Hibari had avoided a hot soak.

As Ranma watched Hibari leave one thought popped into his mind: ‘If I ever can’t get to be a guy again... Hibari would be the best ‘husband’ I could find.’

He quickly blushed and looked away. Ranma couldn’t believe the thought had just struck him.

Hinari’s towel completely behind her to dry her back she let out a panicked shriek when she saw a small (and obviously confused) piglet on the changing area floor. Hibari moved to cover herself, but the diminutive Ryoga had already passed out from blood loss via his large pig nostrils. Ranma scurried out to Hibari to find out what happened.

“H-he was peeping!” Hibari declared, clasping herself onto Ranma.

“I-I think it w-was an honest mistake,” Ranma managed to mutter, trying to ignore the fact that the two of them were currently naked. He wasn’t succeeding. “Ryoga probably couldn’t find his way to peep if he’d wanted to. Probably wanted to find the kitchen or something.”

Hibari looked at him with sad blue eyes. “He still saw me naked.”

Ranma swallowed the rising emotions of protective jealousy and decided the best way out of awkwardness of the nude hug he found himself was some good old insulting.

“He’s seen me naked before already and I’m much better built, so I’m sure he’ll forget seeing you by morning,” Ranma declared with false bravado.

Hibari stood up straight and glared down at the shorter redhead. “Hmph, I think I’ll be extra friendly to Shui when we go on our date. At least he’s a gentleman.”

Hibari then hurriedly dressed herself while Ranma dragged Ryoga into the bathing area. When Ranma heard Hibari storm off he tossed the small pig into the warm bath (careful to keep away from any potentially burning splashes). Ryoga stumbled to consciousness and coughed up some water as he sat up.

“Ya okay pig boy?” Ranma asked, his voice as flat as he could manage.

Ryoga began to blush furiously as his eyes filled with a wonderful memory. “She’s so beautiful.”

“Were you peeking on purpose?”

“Huh? No!” Ryoga declared defensively. “I was on my way to Suzume’s room to sleep. I still don’t understand why her room is in the basement though. Makes it so hard to find.”

Ranma slipped onto his back at that.

“The Oozora’s don’t have a basement,” Ranma muttered as he sat back up. “Have to say though, I’m a bit disappointed you responded so strongly to Hibari, yet don’t care about my being naked. Ain’t
Ryoga had to thank his lucky stars he was already blushing furiously from the thought of Hibari. Otherwise the reminder of Ranma’s current form would have made him blush enough to reveal the truth.

“Ranma. You’re a boy. That’s totally dif-wait. Why are you in the bath? You weren’t bathing with Hibari were you? You-you enemy of women!” Ryoga bellowed, standing up to loom over Ranma.

“It was Hibari’s idea! Honest! I didn’t wanna, but didn’t have a good wait out of it. Plus I really needed the bath. I didn’t look or nothin’!” Ranma declared.

“Poor Hibari. That girl is too innocent and naive for her own good,” Ryoga announced dramatically. “Such a pure heart, seeing the best in everyone. I will protect her from you Ranma!”

“Hibari... innocent and naive? Have you spent more than five minutes with-”

“I won’t have you slandering her,” Ryoga stated, cutting Ranma off. His glaring face was slightly too close to Ranma’s own for comfort.

Ryoga also realised how close he’d gone to Ranma and pulled back nervously. Ryoga then marched out of the bathing area, splashing himself with cold water from the sink. The small piglet then returned to his long trek in search of Suzume’s room.

Ranma however took a while to process something important about the conversation.

‘He thinks Hibari is really a girl. How on earth has he managed that?’ Ranma thought to himself as he got dressed. ‘I knew he was a bit oblivious but this has to be a new record.’

Chapter End Notes

So, how did I decide on Hibari’s cursed form hair colour? Well, first I decided I wanted it to change, because keeping it the same was boring. Then I was thinking blue like Suzume (because she has the most interesting hair colour in the family for the anime), but wasn’t sure. It seemed too on the nose, influenced by the blue-ish colouring of Shampoo and Akane.

So... I turned to the manga to see what hair colour Hibari tended to have. Blonde showed up in most of the publicity shots, but there were two times we got a couple manga pages where she showed up in full colour which both gave Hibari the same hair colour. Combined with a few partially coloured pages and some covers that colour was the most common one overall. That colour being red of course. Clearly I wasn’t thinking on the nose enough. (Brown eyes in the manga vs the blue of the anime though.)

Oh, and if Suzume were to get splashed with Nannichuan she’d go redhead too, since in the manga she’s usually given red hair when coloured. Also in manga she’s said to look just like Hibari used to, which I see as more evidence for manga Hibari being a redhead. (There’s a chance that the scans I’ve used were missing some of the original colour details, but the full colour pages seem a good argument to me. More so than cover art. After all cover art gave us a red headed Shampoo at least one time...)
Waiting for A Cure

Ranma and Hibari made their way to school in very different moods. Ranma was annoyed at yet another day stuck female (he was really hoping Shui had good news for him today) and it showed.

Hibari meanwhile was practically skipping, having avoided her father’s efforts to catch her with a kettle that morning. She knew hot water would find her eventually (Suzume had nearly spilled some soup on her at breakfast, which led Hibari to conclude the water magnetism was in effect even with just powdered Jusenkyo). The fact that anything was odd about her was concealed from the world by the blonde wig she was once more wearing.

“Shampoo!” a voice cried out, and suddenly Hibari found herself wrapped in the arms of a stranger wearing white robes.

A knee to the stomach was Hibari’s first response.

“Who are you calling Shampoo?” Hibari demanded.

The long haired boy looked in Hibari’s general direction with complete confusion on his face.

“I swore Shampoo went this way,” he muttered, before noticing Ranma, “Oh! Shampoo!”

His glomp was intercepted by an uppercut to the chin from the small redhead.

“You always did have spirit my beloved Shampoo.”

“I ain’t Shampoo either!” Ranma shouted.

With that the stranger produced a pair of glasses a put them on.

“Neither of you are Shampoo? I suppose she was moving faster than I thought.”

Hibari and Ranma just ignored him and continued walking to school. Neither wanted anything to do with a friend of Shampoo. Luckily Wakaba High was not very far away as the strange taller boy kept following them.

“Do you two know Shampoo? Has she talked about her Mousse?” he asked.

“Mousse? Like, the cake stuff?” Ranma asked.

“I am Mousse. I am Shampoo’s closest compatriot. I am also the man she is destined to marry!”

Hibari and Ranma stopped and stared at him for a few moments. Both had to wonder how many fiancés Shampoo had.

“Oh yes, that reminds me, I have a mission while in Japan,” Mousse continued with an almost conspiratorial tone. “Shampoo has been forced into two horribly unjust engagements and I must free her. I’m looking for some vile slime of a man named Saotome Ranma.”

“I’m Saotome Ranma, if ya got a problem with me I’m happy to settle it like men!” the short redhead boasted.

Mousse adjusted his glasses, studying Ranma intensely.
“I know I sometimes make mistakes about appearances on the rare occasion, but you don’t look like a man to me.”

“I’m plenty man enough for Shampoo,” Ranma protested.

“Er, yes... perhaps the issue is that you are married to the other villain I need to punish. One Oozora Hibari?”

“I’m Hibari.”

Mousse turned and studied Hibari as well. Then studied Ranma again. Then began muttering something in Mandarin which sounded very confused. As the one long haired Chinese boy struggled to work out what this meant a second Chinese lad with hair just a bit longer arrived. Shui did not look happy to see Mousse.

“Oh, hey Shui. Do you know this guy?” Ranma asked.

Any response was cut off by Mousse suddenly speaking louder and in Japanese again.

“How can you both be girls and engaged to Shampoo!”

“Maybe that why you never have any luck stupid Mousse,” Shui said with a laugh while approaching the group. “You just no Shampoo type.”

“So you do know him then?” Ranma asked. He’d deal with the gender confusion later.

“Yes... er, hear of him. Shampoo childhood friend. Then decide will marry Shampoo. Shampoo say no. He not get message. Shampoo complain about him many time,” Shui explained.

(Hibari decided then and there she was going to start giving that boy some Japanese tutorials. Shui was their eyes and ears with the Amazons, they needed ears that could communicate. And clearly lessons at school were not helping enough.)

Mousse turned to the newcomer and studied Shui as well. Then Mousse’s face flashed a spark of recognition.

“You! Guàiwù! Duòluò zhě!” Mousse began.

There was a great deal more angry Mandarin to follow as he launched a swarm of spike tipped chains at Shui. Shui dodged the assault by leaping onto the walls of Wakaba High. Shui shouted something Mandarin back while producing a jian from somewhere in the forest green hoodie he was wearing. The white robed Chinese boy leapt after Shui and soon the two were engaged in a running battle across the school grounds. The rest of the student body fled as large iron balls on chains slammed into the ground, spears embedded themselves in trees, and at least one rubber ducky somehow flew through the glass of a third floor window.

Ranma and Hibari hurried after to watch the chaos. They weren’t alone, as a number of braver students had found vantage points sheltered behind trees or outbuildings to watch the chaos.

“Are you running a bet Hibari?” a student asked.

“I don’t know how good either of them are. No way I could give useful odds,” she replied. Suba had stressed many times to only run odds she knew without doubt.

The sound of exploding chicken eggs hammered home how unpredictable a fight this was. Ranma
was quite impressed with how well Shui seemed to expect Mousse’s esoteric assaults. With only that jian the longer haired Chinese boy had managed to deflect practically every assault (as shown by the few small scratches in Shui’s hoodie), and even returned a few projectiles like some sort of tennis game.

As Shui dashed in for a sword slice Mousse dodged and produced a pair of scissors. While Shui was still sliding past him the slightly taller Chinese boy sliced into Shui’s hair with reckless zeal, messily lobbing it off to little more than shoulder length.

Shui stumbled forward, clearly stunned, and felt the new length gingerly.

“*I don’t know about you Han, but among my people long hair is reserved for only the best warriors. Only a fool would let his or hers be chopped in battle!*” Mousse bragged.

Shui turned to him, body motions stiff and unsettling. Shui’s red eyes were filled with hatred and a sickly blue aura seemed to flare up around the green clad boy. Suddenly he shot a hand up the sleeve of Mousse’s long robe (a move that Mousse was clearly taken aback by) and pulled out an electric razor. Stumbling backwards it was clear even through his coke bottle glasses that Mousse had terror in his eyes.

“How did you know-?” Mousse began to ask when Shui lunged at him.

The ensuing head shaving happened with surprising speed and all those watching had to admit Shui’s work was impressively even considering how much Mousse had struggled. Shui clearly had a good understanding of hair. When it was done Mousse was left in a state of shock.

Shui just glared at him before marching angrily into the school building. The various spectators followed after. Ranma and Hibari did so to check on Shui while the rest wanted to be well away from Mousse when he regained his senses.

Shui sulked the entire day, despite Ranma and Hibari’s best efforts. Ranma grumbled about it just being hair until Hibari asked how he’d feel about losing his signature pigtail, at which point the short redhead became surprisingly flustered. He decided to focus on schoolwork after that, understanding several things better thanks to Hibari’s tutoring (though he knew he wasn’t going to start getting 90s any time soon... or even 80s probably.).

* * *

Hot water finally caught Hibari in the changing room just before gym. She was still impressed at how long she’d manage to last, considering her dad chasing her with a kettle in the morning, a thermos of soup nearly splashing her during lunch, and the teacher who almost spilled coffee on her on the way to gym class. She decided not to tell Ranma to see if he would notice as she caught up with him at the shoe lockers.

“I’m kind of worried about Shui,” Ranma whispered as she approached. “He nearly knocked someone out with a soccer ball during gym class. Then he stormed off early.”

“I’ll admit, he’s taking the haircut worse than I would,” Hibari admitted.

“I’d say it’s about on par,” the busty redhead replied, rolling his eyes. “We should probably go check on him or something. That’s what friends are supposed to do, right?”

Hibari stared down at him in confusion as she realised his tone was completely sincere in asking that.

“Yes. That *is* what friends do.”
Ranma and Hibari set off towards the Neko Hanten, being fairly certain that Shui lived there. Ranma didn’t like the idea of going into the lion’s den, but he’d sworn to himself he’d start doing better at maintaining friendships, and wasn’t going to quit now.

As they reached the door of the Chinese restaurant Ranma steeled himself. He didn’t want to see Cologne or Shampoo, but there wasn’t much choice. Marching in the pair saw the restaurant was quite quiet. There were two diners at one booth in a corner, and one man who seemed to be waiting to grab some take out. Behind the counter sat Cologne, with something around her neck.

The Phoenix pill.

All thoughts vanished from Ranma’s head as he became focused on acquiring that cure. He barely heard the old ghoul’s cackling as he lunged for her. Suddenly her staff slammed into his face and sent the short redhead flying out into the street. One lucky shot wasn’t going to stop Ranma as he threw himself into a second assault.

Hibari raised an eyebrow as this second attempt went about the same. The third caused her to roll her eyes. The fourth saw her massage the bridge of her nose as she wondered when Ranma would admit defeat. Sure, the boy was cute (even when physically a girl), but Hibari was quite willing to admit he wasn’t always the sharpest. (Not to say he was dumb. Just a little single minded at times.)

Something on the wall caught Hibari’s attention, and she ducked as Ranma flew over her head. Snatching the piece of paper saying ‘waitresses wanted’ Hibari had an idea. She reached Cologne just as a panting Ranma was stumbling forward, fight still in his eyes despite the scrapes, bruises, and red hair sticking every which way.

“We’ll take the jobs,” Hibari announced, blocking Ranma with her outstretched arm.


The chuckling old woman pogo-ed towards the kitchen while Ranma gave Hibari a confused look.

“If we work here it will give us more opportunities to get our hands on that pill,” Hibari whispered.

“Good idea. Though we will have to deal with Shampoo more,” Ranma whispered back. “I don’t like when she glomps me.”

“It does warm my heart how loyal you are,” Hibari replied with a wink.

Ranma glared back. He did have to wonder why he was so against marrying Shampoo though. She was plenty cute. About as cute as Hibari really. Ranma still felt strange admitting Hibari was cute, but if he could admit his own cursed form was objectively cute then he could admit Hibari was as well. Especially since Hibari was using that Nyanichuan powder, so he didn’t have to feel nearly as guilty about it right now.

Wait.

Being close to whisper he realised Hibari’s eyebrows were blonde again. Ranma was left wondering how long Hibari had been back to normal, and blushed a bit. Luckily Ranma’s self reflection was interrupted as Cologne returned from the kitchen, passing some take out boxes to the now quite nervous man who’d been waiting when Ranma and Hibari had arrived. The old Amazon then turned to address the pair she saw as impending son-in-laws.

“I’ve thought your offer over. I accept. You two should be able to keep up with the high demands of working here.”
Hibari gave a polite bow. “Thank you... Um, where is Shui? We were hoping to talk to him a bit.”

Cologne raised an eyebrow. “What about?”

“We were just worried about him,” Ranma replied. “One of Shampoo’s weirdo friends attacked him. Mouse or somethin’. Upset him more than you’d expect.”

“I can explain why,” a man announced as he stepped out of the kitchen. Hibari recognised him as Shui’s father. “You see, while Mousse might not have realised it, Shui’s mother was Joketsuzoku. I did my best to raise my child to understand that code of honour. So naturally the haircut quite annoyed him.”

“Huh,” Ranma replied. “Well, he certainly won the fight. Gave Mousse a good haircut in return.”

“Yes, Shui told me as much. He’ll be quite happy to see you tomorrow, but would like some time to himself right now.”

* * *

The next day Shui had been in a much better mood (and his hair had been cleaned up nicely). He was quite excited to give Ranma and Hibari tips on what to expect at the restaurant. On the way there from school Ranma swore the Chinese boy was almost skipping. As they entered by the back a pair of waitress uniforms were waiting for the two new employees.

“Shui has some chores to do in back. Not be free for a bit. Not until after dinner rush.”

“Sure, we’ll see you then,” Hibari replied with a smile.

Despite Hibari’s willingness to change together a flustered Ranma insisted that with them currently being different sexes they should change separately in the employee washroom.

A few minutes later Hibari and Ranma emerged to the front of the restaurant in uniform, and were promptly glomped by Shampoo.

“Shampoo so happy to be with Airen. Get to hug. Is very nice,” she declared as she rested her head on Ranma’s shoulder.

“There will be time for that later,” Cologne stated.

As a disappointed Shampoo released the pair they were shocked to see her hair was radically different. Well, mostly just shorter. It was still up in ox horn style still, but (apart from her bangs) was massively shorter. Having heard so much about the importance of hair to Joketsuzoku yesterday the pair were left stunned.

“You like?” she asked, patting at it to show off. “Shampoo think that she in Tokyo now. Should have more trendy hair.”

“But-but... the honour bit, and...” Hibari managed to mutter.

“We not in Joketsuzoku village now. Shorter hair popular here,” Shampoo replied matter-of-factly. “Look cute, no?”

Ranma found himself silently agreeing that it was cute.

After the briefest of training by Shampoo (who somehow managed to ensure physical contact with Ranma every 20 seconds and Hibari once or twice) the pair were thrust into serving customers. And
there were lots to serve. Word had gotten around Wakaba that Hibari and Ranma were going to be working there, and it seemed like half the male student body had shown up. Ranma also only realised at that point just how hot the bowls of ramen got, resulting in the need to effectively juggle them so he wouldn’t burn. Still, every chance he got he tried to get his hands on the pill around Cologne’s neck. The old crow was faster than him though.

The failure to capture the pill wasn’t the only thing making Ranma’s blood boil. Seeing Hibari flirting with customers upset him as well. He tried to pretend he was upset about the deception implied, but it was getting harder and harder to ignore the truth about his feelings towards the blonde. His rising temper was soothed a bit when he saw Hibari make a pass for the phoenix pill. The blonde had clearly picked up some pickpocketing tricks from family thugs, the subtlety of her hand gesture almost being missed by Ranma. Sadly it was only a sliver more effective than Ranma’s frontal method, merely earning an amused chuckle from the old woman.

Then there was the pinching and leering. The small redhead was on the edge of breaking some fingers when Shampoo whispered that he needed to behave while passing him.

***

It had been a week, and they still hadn’t gotten their hands on the pill. The extra pocket money was nice, and Hibari had her eye on a cute dress, but the lack of progress was frustrating. Ranma found himself lying on the grass in the yard behind the restaurant. The small redhead staring up at the blue sky. Shui and Hibari were sitting on the back stairs nearby.

“So... When are you planning to take me on that date?” Hibari asked Shui, her tone surprisingly casual.

“When Ranma cured,” Shui replied. “Then we three go... do something?”

Ranma sat up in shock and stared at the Chinese boy. “Three?”

“Shui... the word ‘date’ usually implies just two people,” Hibari tried to explain, wiping away a bit of embarrassment sweat.

“Oh. Used wrong word? What is word for when three people?”

“Just ‘hanging out’ is good,” Hibari replied.

Shui looked lost in thought as a response.

“Bleh,” Ranma grumbled, “We’re going to have to go back in there soon. At least you’re working right now Shui. Shampoo seems to really dislike you. Which is good for us, not having to deal with her while you’re around.”

“Yeah, I don’t think I’ve actually seen you and her in the same room. How do you two manage to live in the same building?” Hibari asked. There was a bit of suspicion in her voice.

“Er, it large building,” Shui answered. He seemed a bit nervous.

Ranma stretched and stood up (he was developing a chronic backache with being locked), preparing to go deal with more customers. He really hoped nobody would pinch today. He hated the pinchers. Especially since he wasn’t allowed to retaliate. His mental complaining was interrupted by Cologne appearing, with a bag labelled ‘chestnuts’ in her arms.

“Follow me,” she announced.
The trio followed her with a bit of confusion. The old woman soon lit up a small fire and poured the chestnuts in. Ranma and Hibari just grew visibly more confused. Then after letting the chestnuts heat up for a few seconds Cologne struck, pulling out every chestnut in a split second, her movements so fast it seemed like she had a dozen arms.

“That, youngins, was the Kachū Tenshin Amaguriken, or Chestnut Fire Fist. An ancient method to train one in rapid strikes. If you ever want to get the pill off me you will need to master that technique. Good luck.”

The tiny old woman wandered away, laughing jovially. As she reached the back door of the restaurant she turned back to the three of them.

“I still expect you to work this shift though. Get moving!”
In the Name of Fairness

Twin fires burned in the yard of the Oozora compound. The occasional shouts of ‘ow’ had drawn in curious observers earlier in the in the week, but by now almost all had grown bored. Suzume and Genma were the last remaining members of the audience, though Ranma was effectively an audience member too. Suzume was mostly there because her pig ‘Co-chan’ had gone missing a few days earlier, so she didn’t have any other good distractions. Genma was there to provide ‘insightful tips’.

“Why do you keep shying away boy?” Genma asked. “Are you going to let Hibari be more of a man than you?”

“I can barely handle lukewarm water. Fire is a bit hotter ya know!” Ranma shot back, even as the redhead tried to get closer.

“I can only manage to grab, like, three or four,” Hibari mumbled. “Cologne could grab a whole pile.”

“You is faster than Shui. Can only grab one or two.”

“Are’. You are faster,” A voice suddenly corrected.

The group turned to see the short older man with a mustache, long hair, and very odd sunglasses.

“I’m just a humble literary scholar who was wandering past. Never mind me. Farewell,” the man announced, before wandering out of sight.

All five of them sat in stunned silence for a few moments. What type of person casually wanders into a Yakuza compound?

“Hey, are you coming to the fair or not?” Ibari asked, arriving in a highly traditional festive outfit.

“Oh! I almost forgot!” Hibari cried out as she leapt to her feet. “I’ve got to go change into my yukata. Oh, and the one I picked out for Ranma too.”

“Hey, wait, why should I go?” Ranma grumbled.

“It should get your mind off your troubles,” Ibari declared, “And I would appreciate you and your father helping with security. Don’t worry about that too much though. Enjoy your evening with your fiancé.”

“Now wait just a minute,” Genma began, his voice nervous. “Just because my boy is stuck for now doesn’t mean it will last.”

“It would make your debt much easier to forgive if your child does stay a girl and gets married to Hibari,” Ibari replied.

Ranma wanted to protest, but was being dragged off by Hibari. When they got to her room the two blue floral patterned yukata were lying on Hibari’s bed. Ranma picked up the shorter one, and had to admit it wasn’t half bad. Hibari had good taste.

* * *

“Why do you have a tank of piranhas?” Suba asked his assistant at the goldfish scooping stall. Why
did Seiichi have to get sick today? This replacement was weird.

“I thought it’d be fun to see if anyone wants give it a shot,” the man replied.

“Well, keep them in the back. I don’t want any kids getting bit,” Suba ordered in frustration as he rubbed his right temple.

Suba wasn’t sure if he’d have to keep a closer eye on the kids or his assistant. His mood was improved when Suzume showed up, followed by Ranma and Hibari.

“What was with that guy selling used socks?” Ranma was muttering.

“I don’t know. We get weird people at festivals sometimes. Hence my dad wanting yours on security,” Hibari replied.

“Well... I do appreciate gettin’ free food everywhere. Don’t even have to flirt. I guess bein’ here with two Oozora’s has its perks.”

“Ooh! Goldfish scooping!” Suzume shouted, clearly excited. “Suba-san! Suba-san! Can I have a turn?”

“Sure, have at it,” Suba replied, handing Suzume a small frying pan.

“Hey, that’s not fair!” another child protested.

Suba ignore the protest and turned to Hibari. Blushing a little he asked: “Where is Tsugumi? Normally she’s looking after Suzume.”

“She has that big illustration to do this week. She’s going to be here a bit later, when the crowds die down. I’ll let her know you asked for her though.”

“Oh, there’s no need for that,” Suba replied nervously.

Ranma found the normally cool gangster getting flustered like a schoolboy about Tsugumi a bit funny. Yet a glance over to the Oozora sibling of his preference left him at least as smitten. It was quite the family.

“How about you two, wanna try the piranha barehand challenge?” the second stall attendant asked. He could see a feisty spirit in both sets of blue eyes.

“Piranha barehanded challenge? Wazzat?” Ranma asked.

“This guy brought a tank of piranhas for some reason,” Suba explained. “Wants an excuse to crack it out.”

“Nah, it’s a real thing. My cousin in Brazil wrote me about it,” the man countered.

“I can handle any challenge, bring it out,” Ranma boasted.

The thug led them to the side of the stall and dropped down his tank of exotic fish. Ranma had heard stories that these fish could strip flesh to bone in seconds. He wasn’t sure if they were true, but he was going to make sure he was fast enough that it didn’t matter.

“Do you really have to take every challenge you encounter?” Hibari asked as Ranma rolled up his sleeves.
“Pretty much. That’s the key to being a great martial artist. You never know what will prove to be good training.”

Turning to the challenge before him Ranma assaulted it with more speed that he’d ever used in his life. As his arms flew at maximum speed he realised what a good substitute this was for the fire training the others had tried. It took maybe 5 seconds to empty the tank.

Panting a bit Ranma started pouring the piranhas back in with the plan to run through a few more practice efforts, while the attendant looked stunned. Suba just gave a knowing smile. Then he turned back to the main tank. He was busy helping Suzume pack up her when a girl about Hibari or Ranma’s age with long dark (slightly blue tinged) hair wandered over.

“Oh, goldfish scooping, I always love that,” Akane said, “Can I give it a shot?”

“Sure, 100 yen,” Suba informed her.

Akane paid and took her best shot. The first one didn’t quite work, but a second scoop netted a goldfish. She was quite pleased with herself when she looked up to see the two teens beside a tank of piranhas. Akane let out a gasp as the redhead’s hands went flying into the tank, yanking out the fish with incredible speed (actually greater than Ranma’s previous attempt).

“Oh, she’s fast,” Akane mumbled as the redhead wrapped up the second attempt.

“Oh yeah, Saotome-kun is almost superhuman at times,” Suba replied with a chuckle. “All that crazy martial arts training.”

Akane felt herself wanting to go make an introduction when Kousaku and Kasumi appeared beside her.

“Akane, we really should be heading home,” Kasumi told her, “You and Kousaku have a lot of homework for tomorrow.”

“Just one moment big sis,” Akane replied and rushed over where Ranma and Hibari were. “Hi there, my name is Akane. I’m a bit of a martial artist myself and I just want to say that your speed is amazing. What school do you study?”

“Anything-Goes, and I’m the best,” Ranma boasted.

Hibari just rolled her eyes and decided not to bring up a certain old woman who could probably beat Ranma blindfolded.

Akane meanwhile blinked in shock. Then she remembered that man who’d shown up to drink with her father a few times recently was named Saotome... wasn’t he? Was there really another girl who studied the same school as her? She felt her heart flutter slightly. Glancing to the blonde she wondered if maybe both girls were martial artists.

“Akane! We really must get going!” Kasumi cried out. It wasn’t yelling, but still showed a tinge of impatience.

“Coming!” Akane cried back before turning back to Ranma and Hibari, “You should come by the Tendo Dojo sometime!”

“Who were those two girls?” Kousaku asked as Akane came into normal speaking range.

“I think she might be the daughter of daddy’s friend who keeps showing up,” Akane replied.
“Oh, Saotome-san has a daughter? Odd he never mentioned her. Only his son,” Kasumi said.

“She certainly looks like a Saotome girl,” Kousaku said a bit dreamily. “Those cute big... eyes. Cute eyes.”

“Ugh, boys,” Akane grumbled. “If her and the other girl come over you better not annoy them.”

By that point the three had wandered out of view. Ranma had watched them leave. As she left Ranma had to admit silently the dark haired girl was cute. Maybe he would go visit that dojo...

A yank on his ear got his attention back to Hibari.

“Going to keep training, or do you plan to spend the night chasing girls?” Hibari asked. “I’m not sure you’ll have much luck in your current condition. Odds are much less in your favour than usual. Might find one if you’re lucky.”

Ranma blushed at the implication.

“Hey! Your keep flirting with customers at work!” Ranma protested.

“Waitresses flirting for better tips is a time honoured tradition. Not all of us with blessed with a figure like yours that guarantees great tipping,” Hibari countered.


“It’s just a fact. You have a very nice body, whichever form you’re in,” Hibari stated.

Ranma turned away to attend the fish for a third attempt, trying to ignore the way he was feeling as a result of Hibari complimenting him. Hibari meanwhile felt herself blushing at the fact that she’d effectively admitted to finding Ranma attractive either way.

* * *

It was early morning as Ranma marched towards the Neko Hanten, dawn still just starting. Hibari was following behind reluctantly. They hadn’t gotten much sleep the night before, Ranma having spent hours mastering the Kachū Tenshin Amaguriken via piranha (a method which Hibari also ran a few practice rounds on, finding it much nicer than sticking her hands in fire). It wasn’t until about 3am that Hibari had managed to talk him into getting a bit of sleep.

Barging into the still dark restaurant the pair greeted by the sight of a sleepy Shui mopping the floor. The pink shirt he was wearing looked just a little too small. Shui’s face lit up upon seeing Ranma, and he rushed over. However just before grabbing the small redhead in what looked like it was going to be a hug Shui switched to placing an hand on Ranma’s shoulder and shaking his hand. Then Shui gave Hibari a friendly pat on the shoulder.

“Shui can tell you look ready to beat gr-gruesome old Cologne. How you manage training?” A sleepy Shui asked.

“Modified it,” Ranma replied with a cocky grin. “Now where is that old hag? I’ve got a pill to grab.”

“She is downstairs. Said she saw you training at the fair. Is waiting for you.”

Ranma rushed down the stairs, revenge on the little redhead’s mind. Hibari yawned and followed, grumbling that they could have slept in and enjoyed their Sunday morning before rushing over. The basement was dark, but they could hear Cologne gently humming somewhere in the darkness.
Ranma tried to focus on the sound, ready to strike blind.

The effort was unneeded as the lights for the room flashed on, revealing what looked like a Chinese bamboo forest. A moment’s study revealed the endless expanse was mostly mural paintings on the walls, but the basement was surprisingly roomy. Hibari had to wonder if it spread into surrounding lots, but Ranma’s focus was entirely on the small figure seated in the middle of the room.

Ranma threw himself towards Cologne with unbridled fury. Cologne dodged the leap, but the two were more evenly matched as both their arms disappeared into a blur of motion. Cologne’s face grew remarkably serious after a few seconds as she realised Ranma had learned far faster than expected. The remarkable speed and energy exerted caused both to leap apart after about a minute. Catching their breath, both began to circle the other.

“Impressive learning curve son-in-law,” Cologne replied with a chuckle.

Ranma made another lunge, which Cologne jovially dodged. Her concentration on the greater threat in the room was enough that she didn’t notice Hibari moving on an intercept course until the last moment. There was a clear moment of apprehension as the tiny woman dodged by a hair. Ranma was back at her as soon as she’d made it away from Hibari, and the old Amazon found the two making an effective double team. Each time she dodged one the other would pounce. Ranma was the faster of the two, while Hibari was better at hiding her intentions.

While she was technically losing the fight Cologne was very pleased. The two had subconsciously picked up on the teamwork training she’d put them both through while waitressing. She was certain if they found themselves fighting beside Shampoo that same training would shine through. Cologne had been worried at first when Shampoo had described her confusing trip to Japan. The pair had seemed like they might not make the best husbands for her great granddaughter (there also being the lingering question if they’d technically make husbands at all), but seeing their impressive skills and rapid learning curve Cologne knew they would make fine additions to her clan.

Dodging Hibari’s fist Cologne had to let out a chuckle. She could keep the fight up for some time, and cracking open a few of her more destructive techniques would win her the day. Neither would be necessary though, and Cologne really didn’t want to do unneeded damage to her new restaurant. It was time to ‘slip up’ and let Ranma get his hands on the pill.

Cologne over-dodged Hibari, and Ranma cracked a smile at the old woman messing up. Pushing a hand forward with superhuman speed he snatched the necklace from her. Pulling away he popped on the container to grab the pill.

“Too slow old woman!” Ranma laughed before swallowing his salvation.

He probably should have gotten some water to swallow a pill of that size. After a bit of gagging it was down. He was surprised just how much cooler the room began to feel after mere moments.

Cologne smiled. Part of her had wanted to keep the game up for longer. If she had been working against Ranma alone she likely would have. See if just a little more pressure might make him break. Hibari though... that child had responded very poorly to this particular move. Continuing it would likely burn that bridge entirely and lose Shampoo a husband for certain.

Luckily the blonde had also shown Cologne the best way to play with Ranma. Jealousy.

“I must say, you held out much longer than I’d expected Ranma,” Cologne informed them. “Truly impressive willpower... Or perhaps the curse doesn’t bother you as much as you claim?”
“It bothers me plenty!” Ranma shouted back.

Not caring to hear a reply Ranma rushed up the stairs to find some hot water. Hibari and Cologne gave chase, the former still giving the latter a bit of stink eye. Reaching the main dining hall they found Shampoo waiting with a smile and kettle.

“Airen can be boy again?”

“Better be,” Ranma grumbled as he grabbed the kettle.

Pouring it over his head Ranma let out a sigh of relief as the tingling of the transformation began without any searing pain. It was strange, but that tingling in and of itself was something he’d kind of missed. Having his height and masculinity restored was what really brought a smile to his face of course. Shampoo instantly pulling him into a hug was a bit less appreciated. Hibari countering with a hug from the other angle meanwhile was appreciated a bit more. Hibari was also nice enough to let go quicker. Prying himself from Shampoo took far more effort, but proved doable.

“Shampoo very happy. One husband who live like girl more than enough.”

“We’re not married,” Hibari grumbled.

“Will be. Shampoo patient.”

“Ya don’t seem very patient to me,” Ranma grumbled as he turned to leave.

“You do look good in that shirt though Shampoo. Pink is your colour,” Hibari added with a wink as she walked out the door.

She couldn’t help but giggle as Shampoo beamed before suddenly paling. Still giggling, Hibari hurried after Ranma. The handsome black haired boy was leading them home, and Hibari was happy to follow. He wasn’t always the brightest, but he was cute. And following him gave a nice view as those pants were a bit tight in his male form.

* * *

The thug guarding the front door took a few moments to recognise Ranma. Which did not impress the young man. Storming off to get some breakfast he was glad to see Ibari and Tsugumi were still seated at the table, discussing something. Ranma plopped himself down at his usual seat, Hibari sitting down beside him. The Oozora father glanced over to acknowledge them.

Then gave a second look. He began to sweat and his pupils dilated.

“White crocodiles!” was all he managed before falling over, clutching his chest.

Seiji burst in with medication while Tsugumi was giving her father some basic first response care. After a few minutes the mustachioed yakuza boss was sitting back up, and Tsugumi felt safe to run off to get some breakfast for the teens.

“I-I see you’re b-back to your old self Ranma,” Ibari stammered.

“Yep. You never shoulda doubted me. Though Hibari did help.”

Hibari wondered if that was the closest Ranma would give to a thank you.

* * *
“You didn’t change your shirt?” Cologne asked Shampoo coldly. “How could you manage such a basic mistake?”

Shampoo stammered an explanation, and received a crack on the head for her trouble.

“It’s a good thing our new order of instant Jusenkyo came in. The twin powder should throw them back off the scent. Remember, we have to approach this situation delicately,” Cologne scolded.

“Shampoo still not understand need for so much secrecy. Why not just tell future husbands now?”

“Several reasons. Firstly, you made a rather poor first impression on both son-in-laws. There’s also the issue of your being naturally female. Both son-in-laws are in love, so the odds of either showing interest in your true form are low. Jusenkyo might allow us to easily fix the latter issue, but the former will take time. Ranma is beginning to trust ‘Shui’, but if Hibari tells him all our hard work will be for naught. We have to get them to care for at least one of your forms before revealing the truth.”

“Shampoo still wish she could hug Airen more often... Or suppose should say: Shui wish ‘he’ could hug Airen at all...”

“You know that behaviour is frowned upon here. Besides, you also have to remember how annoying Mousse’s pursuit can be. Males should be more subtle and demure in these things, and you have to convince them you can act the part of a male to win their love.”

‘Hibari isn’t subtle... or acting male,’ Shampoo thought to herself. She knew better than to challenge Cologne to head on though. Besides, if she talked about it too much she might admit to rather liking her current marriage options Cologne might raise an eyebrow. That was rather close to something very improper for a young Joketsuzoku warrior.
Finally, a Date!

Ryoga was beside himself. The flowers he bought were still alive (mostly). He was in the right building. And there before him stood Hibari’s door. He just had to knock.

Okay, ‘just’ made the task sound to easy.

She’d come out eventually though. Maybe he could just wait for her to open the door, and he’d be waiting there... no. That was creepy wasn’t it?

He didn’t want to be a creep, so he’d knock. He closed his eyes, and... took a deep breath.

Then he knocked.

The door opened, and he shoved the flowers forward.

“Hello! I really like you and would you go on a date with me please?” he blurted before his confidence could give out.

There was the sound of water splashing. Then the response.

“Oh Ryoga! I didn’t know you cared so. How romantic!” replied a feminine voice.

Ryoga just blushed with a dumb grin growing on his face. Then his brain realised that wasn’t Hibari’s voice.

Opening his eyes, he found himself looking at Ranma’s bright red hair. (The rest of his short stature was blocked by the flowers Ryoga held.)

“Rrrranma,” Ryoga growled.

“Huh, that’s a sudden shift pal. You really know how to play with a guy’s heart,” Ranma replied, before bursting into laughter so hard he cried.

The commotion caused Hibari to open her door (which was of course just one door down... Ryoga had been so close). Looking at the scene the blonde jumped to an instant conclusion.

“I knew there was no way you chased Ranma to China over some bread and one duel!”

“What!?” both boys shouted in unison.

“You’re kidding right?” Ranma added.

“He just brought you flowers. And look at the way he’s blushing. Definitely a crush.”

Ryoga grew even redder. “I had the wrong door!”

“Mhm, knowing this doof, he was probably aiming to ask out some girl in Osaka.”

Ryoga punched Ranma in the shoulder. “I’m not that bad! I was only one door down! They really should label these door or something.”

“One door... Ooh, are those for me then?” Hibari asked, her face lighting up.

“YES!” Ryoga blurted, shoving them forward with enough force and speed that Hibari barely
dodged what could have been a blow to the head.

“Thanks,” she replied with only a little sarcasm.

“W-w-will y-you go o-on me with d-date?” Ryoga stammered.

Hibari took a moment to process what he meant before smiling.

“A better invitation for a date than Ranma’s ever given. Sounds good. What’s the plan?”

Ryoga’s brain ground to a halt. He hadn’t actually planned that far. He’d barely managed this much.

Ranma meanwhile was seething. Hibari kept claiming to like him, yet had so far agreed to dates with two different guys... even if Shui’s had turned out to be just a request to hang out as friends the principle was the same. Of course he was still trying to retain some sliver of a claim that he didn’t have any feelings back and it was just Hibari ensnaring another guy that annoyed him. It was a perverted game for the blonde or something right?

Hibari of course see the jealousy on Ranma’s face, and was loving it. If that was the only way to get him to express that he cared then that was the route Hibari would take. She was patient, and willing to chip away at his resistance.

“Ryoga, just stand still. I’ll change into something nice and we’ll go to a cute cafe in Oizumi,” Hibari announced with a giggle.

Ryoga followed the instructions well, being frozen with shock. Ranma however responded by slamming his door and flopping face first onto his bed.

“Ow,” he muttered thanks to the pain of landing on his breasts. Darn things were too sensitive.

Why had he used that glass of water to amplify his teasing or Ryoga? Now he’d have to get a shower. And it hadn’t been that long since he’d gotten the Phoenix Pill. Was Cologne giving right when she asked if the curse didn’t really bug him?

No way. He wanted a cure. Definitely. He was manly.

The sound in the hall revealed that Hibari had finished changing and was busy leading Ryoga off. Ranma sat up in a huff.

“Fine, see if I care. Hibari can toy with someone else heart for a change. Plus, Ryoga can date a guy if he wants to. Even if I think that’s wro-”

Then he remembered. Ryoga had somehow managed to be oblivious to Hibari’s sex... and had seen Hibari nude only while Hibari had been using that Nyanichuan powder. Staring at the door Ranma paled.

“That could go very badly,” Ranma stated, genuine concern clear in his voice. “I have got to keep an eye on them. Who knows how Ryoga might respond.”

He might not be willing to admit how he felt romantically towards the blonde, but he knew he at least valued Hibari as a friend. And he knew Ryoga had a bit of a temper. He didn’t want to think how the revelation might end up mixing with that.

* * *

“So, you’re paying... right?” Hibari asked as she and Ryoga approached the more built up area
surrounding the Oizumi station.

“Yes,” Ryoga replied with a violent nod.

“What’s the budget?”

“Uhhh,” Ryoga panicked and simply produced his wallet.

Hibari raised and eyebrow, but cracked the wallet open. There was a lot more cash than she expected. The temptation to clean him out was definitely there, but she reluctantly admitted he probably needed that money to live on for a while with his wandering life.

“Yes,” Hibari replied as she returned the wallet.

The cafe in question was a cute little two floor establishment with a wide selection of French pastries. After ordering a slice of mille crêpe each the pair sat down at a booth. Hibari had chosen the restaurant for two reasons: she honestly wanted to go; and she’d told Ranma a few times that she wanted to visit. So Mr. Jealousy should find them pretty easily. She felt a tiny bit guilty using Ryoga for this, but he seemed lost on cloud nine right now so clearly it wasn’t that bad for him.

As she finished up the crêpe Hibari was feeling a bit disappointed to have not yet spotted Ranma. Maybe he was just going to sulk about the date? That was no fun. Hibari did have a feeling of being watched though (as the children of a Yakuza boss one of the first things any of the Oozora kids were taught was how to know when you were being watched... just in case). Scanning the room Hibari realised the feeling was coming from a small brunette in large glasses and a very feminine pin-striped pink dress. Someone in love with Ryoga perhaps? The girl seemed familiar... probably just the hair. It was the same cut as Tsubame’s. Maybe not the intended audience, but Hibari was still ready to put on a show.

“So, Ryoga, did you think of anything you might like to do next?”

“N-next? Um... Do you like lizards? There’s a new reptile store that opened up in Shinagawa. We could walk over there?” Ryoga replied, desperate to think of anything interesting in the area.

Hibari felt a bit of sweat run down her face, realising that Ryoga’s sense of direction would leave her having to do all the planning. (Shinagawa was not in walking distance after all.) Lizards also weren’t totally her thing, but kittens and guinea pigs were a bit of a different story.

“There is a pet store that’s a bit closer. They tend to have some cute animals you can watch. Oh, and maybe we should see if they’ve got anything pig-sized you’d like Co-chan.”

Ryoga’s gut lurched as he realised he was being teased. “Pa-pardon?”

“It’s just a joke. If you don’t want to visit the pet shop, then... well, we could go see a movie. I hear A Taxing Woman’s Return is funny.”

“Sure,” Ryoga nodded. Moving away from the teasing was a good thing. (It had been playful though, right?)

Hibari dragged the fanged boy off towards the theatre. She made sure that they weren’t too fast, so the ‘stealthy’ brunette could keep following them. As they walked though Hibari was able to take a peek back at their pursuer a few times, and noticed that the girl’s movements were surprisingly unfeminine. Maybe... no. Hibari dismissed the thought. After all the fuss he gave Hibari, there was no way Ranma would show up in a dress. Right?
Approaching the theatre they were surprised to find a massive line, visible from a few blocks away. Looking up at the posters it became clear as to the reason: that American movie *Robocroc* was finally hitting Nerima theatres. Hibari had completely forgotten how excited some of the guys at school had gotten over the idea. The blonde let out a sigh, not wanting to be stuck in line.

“Well, I guess that puts a damper on the date.”

“N-no. It’s still the best day of my life. Your willingness to overlook my curse. And my nervousness,” Ryoga began nervously as he took Hibari’s hand. “You make me happier than I’ve ever been.”

Ryoga’s grip on Hibari’s hand began to grow painfully tight. She tried not to wince.

“Hibari-chan! I-I... I love you!” he shouted, before moving to give what would be a painful bear hug. Luckily he was interrupted by a flying mailbox to the head.

“Two timer!”

Turning to the sound of the voice Hibari and Ryoga saw the small brunette had caught up to them. And looked ticked off.

“Dating some Tokyo hussy when you have me, your fiancée, back in Nagoya. I knew I needed to keep an eye on you!”

“F-fiancée?” Ryoga stammered. “But... I’ve never seen you before. I swear, Hibari, I have no idea who she is!”

The brunette produced a microphone dramatically before explaining: “I suppose it’s no surprise. It was an arranged marriage, decided when we were both young. But you father has told me so much about you Ryoga. I fell in love before even meeting you!”

Ryoga began to panic. Two beautiful girls ready to fight over him. How had he gotten so lucky? It was all about to come crashing down, wasn’t it? He was never allowed to be this happy.

“Oh? You’re his fiancée? I’m sorry! I would have never come between such true love. Here, have him,” Hibari replied with excessive flair before shoving Ryoga forward. The voice of the ‘brunette’ was the final clue she needed to know for sure.

“Gah!” the brunette managed as the confused Ryoga went for a hug.

Ryoga’s grip was clearly far too tight, forcing the smaller figure to squirm in an attempt to escape. The squirming caused the brown wig to tumble off, revealing Ranma’s bright red hair beneath. Both boys froze.

“If you two need a room I know where the nearest love hotel is,” Hibari told them with a laugh. “You could have just told me I was too feminine for you though Ranma.”

That comment efficiently sent Ranma into a momentary state of shock.

Ryoga released the slight shocked Ranma from the hug, but quickly switched to a choke hold.

“Rrrraaanmaaaa...I’m going to kill you. Tricking me in front of Hibari like that! Do you really think I’d want to go on a date with a cross-dressing guy?” Ryoga seethed as he tightened his grip.

“That was. The whole. Point of. Interruptin’!” Ranma managed to reply as he struggled. He
managed to free an arm to point at Hibari. “You on a date with him was going to end badly, I knew it!”

Ryoga’s grip loosened slightly as his mind raced. “What do you mean ‘him’? Hibari is a girl! I saw... accidentally... but I saw!”

“Gak,” Ranma grunted as the short redhead struggled for air. “Tell him the truth Hibari. He hangs out at your place enough he’ll find out eventually! Howdy think he’ll handle someone else tellin’ him.”

Hibari blushed. “Heheh... instant Jusenkyo powder... had red hair too.”

Ryoga released Ranma. The small redhead gasped for air. Ryoga was left looking back and forth between the two, his face an unreadable mess of emotions.

“I-I-I have to go!” he shouted, before bounding off onto rooftops.

Hibari crouched down beside a Ranma still gasping for air.

“I knew he wouldn’t handle it well. This way he might not want to kill us,” Ranma gasped.

“I... I suppose I appreciate the thought,” Hibari replied a bit coldly. She was bitter about Ranma making her say that... but he had come to rescue her in the best way he could think of. Which was strangely chivalrous. “Also, cute dress. Of course you have to admit you’re a total hypocrite now.”

“This is a disguise!” Ranma fumed as he recovered his breath. “Totally different concept.”

Hibari only giggled in response.
Ranma and Hibari walked to school, sweating in the heat of the Tokyo summer. Early June had been surprisingly cool that year, but almost as if it was anticipating the solstice the next Monday the thermometer was soaring today. Ranma thanked his lucky stars he’d fixed the cat’s tongue when he did. The ringing of a bicycle bell provided a momentary distraction from the humidity.

“Nihao Tongzhi!” Shui called out cheerfully. “Shui has borrowed bicycle. Make walk to school shorter.”

“Oh. Morning Shui,” Ranma managed.

He wasn’t really sure what else to say. He did notice Hibari was still treating Shui a bit coldly. He didn’t know why Hibari had been acting that way all week, but it seemed like Shui did.

“Have idea for what we do with ‘hanging out’. Cologne want open up beachfront booth on weekends. Maybe we go this Sunday, have fun beach day?”

“Ranma just got over that Cat’s Tongue nonsense the old mummy put on him. Do you really think he wants to go to the beach with water everywhere?” Hibari asked sharply.

“Oh... Shui not think of that. Tongzhi Ranma can stay out of water though? Maybe?” Shui answered nervously as Hibari glared.

“As are goin’ to be lots of other food stalls?” Ranma asked, sliding himself between the two. He might not know why tension was flaring up, but wanted to calm things down.

“Yes. Very many. Start of summer rush means many restaurants open up stalls.”

“Then I can handle going in girl mode,” Ranma replied casually, “Easier to get free grub that way.”

Hibari looked at him with honest concern. “Are you sure that’s okay?”

“Yeah. If I ain’t locked I’m fine with it.”

“Shui have Jusenkyo powder for Hibari too. That good for beach, no?”

As if to prove a point Shui produced two packets and tossed them to Hibari. Her cold attitude seemed to lighten, bringing a smile to Ranma’s face. He wasn’t good at building friends networks, and didn’t want this one to collapse so quickly.

* * *

A pair of redheads were digging through the bathing suit selection of a fashionable Shibuya clothing store. There was quite a lot of angry whispering between the two, but they made sure no one nearby could make out what they were saying. Ranma simply was not going for the more cutesy options Hibari kept offering him. Nor the more revealing ones.

“I think this might be good,” Ranma offered, holding up a functional orange and blue one piece. It even said ‘Boy’ in Latin script.
“No. That’s much too boring. I want to wear something cuter.”

“I was talking about for me.”

“We should wear matching outfits. It would be cute.”

Ranma felt his eye twitch. He didn’t think he could bring himself to wear anything Hibari felt was a good outfit. Her tastes were simply way too feminine.

“Ooh, what about this? It looks fun,” Hibari announced, producing a red swimsuit. It was a one-piece, but the was lacking in fabric to the point it would look like a two-piece from the front. “I do like red... but the sky blue one would go with red hair well.”

Looking it over Ranma felt a sudden twinge of mischievousness. It was actually pretty sporty. Sexy, but not super revealing. His pop would have something close to heart attack seeing Ranma in that. And Hibari’s old man would definitely have a heart attack seeing the two of them dressed like that. Plus, he would look good, and that would make it all the easier to get his hands on free grub. A smile grew on his face in anticipation.

“This could be fun,” Ranma laughed as he grabbed a matching sky blue and yellow set.

Hibari quietly raised an eyebrow. Ranma seemed to be growing rather more open to dressing up. Yet seemed to deny the idea just as strongly as ever while in male form. Her fiancé might be engaging in some unhealthy compartmentalising.

* * *

That Sunday dawn was very early. It was after all the 2nd longest day of the year. Ranma grumbled, finding 4:30 an unreasonable time to be awoken by the sun. He decided to just close his eyes and enjoy the calm. As he did he felt a body rub up beside him, and half opening his eyes he registered Hibari’s sleeping form. He was going to push the blonde away when he realised that Hibari was not currently blonde. His fiancée had managed to avoid hot water the night before, so the powder induced transformation was still in effect from their swimsuit shopping.

Hibari snuggled into Ranma’s side, murmuring something in her sleep and Ranma decided that maybe for once he wouldn’t kick her out. Right now she was just a cute girl. And he was a boy. He could pretend that their relationship was normal. That he didn’t switch sexes what felt like at least twice day. That she wasn’t born with an incorrect body. That he wasn’t supposed to ignore the feelings growing between them and somehow find Hibari a girl to fall in love with.

He could ignore all the confusion until the next time he saw her blonde hair at least.

* * *

Munching on breakfast after a brief sparring session with Genma left Ranma feeling smug. He’d managed to stay dry and male the whole time, which was just going to make the swimsuit reveal that much more of a shock. The panda across from him meanwhile had had much less luck, and was waiting for the kettle to boil.

As a blonde plunked down beside Ranma to eat Ibari cleared his throat.

“So, I hear you two are heading to the beach today?”

“Yeah, Shui invited us,” Ranma replied. Out of the corner of his eye he confirmed Hibari’s eyebrows were still red. She was just in a wig.
The mustachioed yakuza boss’ eyes narrowed as he stared Ranma down.

“You will make sure Hibari stays out of trouble right? I can barely imagine what he might get up to at the beach.”

“Don’t worry, I’ll make sure he doesn’t do anything I wouldn’t do,” Ranma replied with a smile. “I even talked him into wearing the same swimwear as me.”

Ibari smiled confidently. “Good work! Maybe you can make a man of him yet.”

Hibari and Ranma both struggled to stay straight faced for the rest of breakfast. After a quick scramble to eat it all the two hurried back upstairs. Hibari had her powder induced form already, while Ranma just needed a glass of water. Once Ranma was physically changed they then slipped on their matching pseudo-bikinis and grabbed a couple towels. Heading down the stairs both were giggling furiously (though Ranma would insist his was a chuckle).

Strolling confidently past the living room where Genma had convinced Ibari to play some shogi the two part time redheads waited for a response. The two stocky men were however deeply engrossed in their game and it was up to Hibari to get their attention by clearing her throat.

“I thought you’d like to see our swimsuits,” Hibari announced.

Both fathers turned towards the children they considered their sons and paled in unison. The swimsuits hugged both teens well and the adorable pose the two had taken together furthered the absolute lack of masculinity in their appearance. The shock hit Ibari to the point that he collapsed twitching (and possibly foaming at the mouth it was hard to tell from Ranma and Hibari’s angle). Genma effectively turned to stone at the sight. It was only after the usual first aid crew had stabilised Ibari that the elder Saotome found the ability to speak to the pair.

“Ranma... What do you think you’re doing?” he asked, fear in his voice.

“Well, I can’t really wear a guy’s swimsuit thanks to you. So I figured I might as well just go all in.”

“And I couldn’t have my future husband out girly me. So had to at least match him.”

Genma’s eyes grew distant, as he seemed to imagine some sort of life and death scene. Under his breath he muttered: “I tried... I really tried... I’m so sorry...”

Ranma wondered what on earth his old man was rambling about when he heard Shui’s voice from the front door. The pair of redheads strolled confidently towards the door ready for a day of fun (even if it meant a car ride with Cologne). Shui marvelled at the two for a moment.

“You both look very... what word? Feminine?”

“It’s an opportunity for some good fun. And I want to see the Shampoo squirm. She doesn’t seem to like me being in girl mode as much,” Ranma replied. “So I’ll dress the part.”

“Hmm... yes... definitely,” Shui replied cryptical while giving them both a once over.

There was something in those eyes that made Hibari curious. It seemed like a guilty interest. Hibari realised Shui was Shampoo that would rather suggest Ranma was at least partially wrong about Shampoo’s preferences...

Shui gestured to lead them out to the waiting minivan. The pair hastily donned some jelly shoes and headed out. Shui’s father sat in the driver’s seat and Cologne was beside him. Both looked surprised.
at the swimsuits the redheads wore. What surprised Hibari though was the third person waiting seated at the side sliding side door with her feet on the ground beside the van.

It was Shampoo.

Hibari’s eyes flitted back and forth between Shampoo and Shui, trying to process it.

Shampoo glomped the pair, apparently ignorant of Hibari’s slight meltdown.

“You both look too cute,” she announced. If Hibari had been more alert she might have noticed the similar glint of guilty interest in Shampoo’s eyes. “Shampoo just sad she no can go swimming too. Is needed in kitchen all day.”

Ranma just rolled his eyes and sat in the back corner of the van. Hibari plunked herself down in the back middle. Shui slide protectively in the final read seat just before Shampoo could slide in to cuddle her fiancés. The two briefly exchanged a strange look. Blocked from her prefered seat, the indigo haired girl sat in the middle pair of seats, but seemed to have little understanding of seatbelt safety as she set herself up backwards to chat.

Despite Ranma ignoring her completely and Hibari giving only limited responses to avoid being too rude Shampoo rambled most of the drive. Shui nodded off for most of the ride.

When they finally arrived and were parked Hibari let out a sigh of relief. Shui informed them that all hands had to help with some set up still, but Shui would find them later. The redheads decided to head towards the area where most of the food stalls were set up first.

“Hey, why don’t we make this a competition?” Ranma announced as they neared the stands.

“What precisely do you mean by that?”

“We split up. Each gets 10 minutes to score as much free food as possible. Then we compare our hauls.”

“That could be fun. Do we compare by price or by quantity?”

Ranma paused to think it over for a second. “Quantity. Otherwise we’d need receipts.”

“You’re on,” Hibari declared with a playful wink.

Ranma headed towards the thick of the crowd. He managed his cutest ‘please sir I have no money’ face at a good three stalls before he felt the need to back off a bit. Plus he had to work out how to hide his haul without any pockets. As he moved to slightly further out stalls he caught a glimpse of Hibari. She was surrounded by close to a dozen young men clearly running a complex sob story. She didn’t have any food yet though. Ranma smugly made his way to another yatai.

By the end of the 15 minutes Ranma had managed to bag some yaki imo, a nikuman dumpling, an ikayaki, a taiyaki, and two kyuri. A good haul of savory foods. Hibari appeared a few moments later, carrying a crêpe, some curry rice, a couple takoyaki, and a small okonomiyaki.

“I’ll admit, you came close,” Ranma declared with a confident grin, “But your technique takes too much build up time.”

“Indeed, you certainly won this round sensei,” Hibari replied with a dramatic bow.

Ranma laughed as he munched on the dumpling.
“How did you get so good at that so fast anyway?” Hibari asked. “You’ve only had the curse for what, three or four months now...”

“I was an adorable kid. Was easy to play the ‘cute scared child’ routine and get a buncha free eats. Course with the ponytail I had some people think I was a little girl from time to time. Which was awkward.”

Hibari began giggling at that. Especially with Ranma’s currently lovely figure.

“Oh yeah, laugh it up pretty boy. Anyway, it was disappointin’ when the routine stopped working at like age 11. Puberty an’ whatnot really ruined the effect.”

“Puberty...” Hibari half hissed under her breath.

“So it’s a silver linin’ to the curse. Got one of my favourite pastimes back. It was weird havin’ my voice ‘un-drop’ though... Speakin’ of: what’s with your voice? I swear it actually gets deeper when you’re using that powder.”

Hibari blushed a bit as she swallowed a mouthful of crêpe.

“Well... I can stop pushing my voice up when I’m like this.”

Ranma tilted his head a bit and raised a red eyebrow.

“I realised my voice would probably drop some day when I was about eight. So I talked my dad into letting me take singing lessons. He wasn’t sure about the idea, but I managed to get Tsugumi on board so he gave in. Using that training I learned how to raise the pitch of my voice. When I’m like this though I can just talk normally.”

Ranma nodded a bit. It did make sense. He’d somehow never clued in that Hibari’s voice should have dropped at some point. Suddenly he was very curious what Hibari’s natural voice sounded like.

“You! The perverts!” a vaguely familiar voice called out.

Ranma and Hibari wondered what that commotion was about, but didn’t want to get involved.

“You two crossdressers!” the voice continued, “I’ve learned the truth! I’m here to free Shampoo from your cold dead hands. I formally challenge both of you! We shall settle this like men!”

The redheads both turned around to see Mousse standing there. His shaved head made him look quite comedic. Neither of them had time to laugh though as a wave of chains and spikes flew towards them. Hibari and Ranma split apart hoping Mousse could only track one of them while the other could move in. Unfortunately he was able to switch targets with remarkable speed (though limited accuracy) and was able to force Hibari back. Ranma was able to move in for melee range and flew forward with a kick. Mousse had a major advantage of reach however, and intercepted Ranma with a kick of his own.

As the small redhead stumbled backwards Hibari moved in for the assault. Mouse responded with another volley of assorted projectiles. Hibari managed to dodge most of them. Only most though. A ball and chain slammed into her mid-section, winding her as she flew back.

Crashing into some yatai it took Hibari a moment to pull herself back up. Fighting in a swimsuit wasn’t the best option. She was covered in scrapes.

Brushing herself off Hibari saw Ranma was having rather more luck at dodging, yet continued to fail
his assaults the reach difference between him and Mousse. Trying to figure out an attack strategy
Hibari was happy to see Shui arrive.

“What going on?”

“Mousse declared a formal challenge on Ranma and me. If he just wanted Shampoo I’d be happy to
throw the fight, but he seems a little murderous. Also there’s no way Ranma will willingly lose
anything.”

“Aiyah! Formal challenge mean Shui no can get involved. Wanted to help. Stupid Mousse ruin
date... er, hangout.”

“Yeah, he seems pretty annoying. Must annoy Shampoo about as much as she annoys us.
Unfortunately his style is just so bizarre and unpredictable I can’t manage to get in. Ranma is
managing, but he’s so short in girl form he has no reach.”

Shui nodded thoughtfully. Then glanced around at the field of battle. Those red eyes landed on a
water gun someone had left abandoned when the fight broke out. Shui cracked a smile.

“Mousse have Jusenkyo curse. Actually Shui fault. Stupid Mousse attack Shui at Jusenkyo. Dodge
him and he fly right into pool. Ranma certainly have height advantage if you hit Mousse. Very small
harmless animal.”

Hibari’s eyes lit up. “Thanks!”

Rushing over Hibari grabbed the water gun and was glad to see it was about half full. With Mousse
focused on Ranma she was able to sneak into range before the bespectacled teen noticed her. Mousse
launched a wave of throwing knives which Hibari barely dodged. However the assault took enough
of Mousse’s attention he didn’t notice the stream of water flying towards his face. As it splashed him
he suddenly disappeared into his robes.

Ranma, Hibari, and Shui approached cautiously. The lump in the robes that had to be Mousse moved
down a sleeve with determination. The form of a small long haired black cat with a shaved head
pulled itself out of the sleeve.

“C-cat... H-he’s a cat,” Ranma stuttered.

Any surprise about Ranma’s sudden nervousness was overtaken by Mousse holding up a paw.
Rather than producing a few short feline claws instead a number of sickle like blades emerged.
Hibari swore that cat-Mousse smiled before he lunged at Ranma’s face (more blades emerging where
claw should be on his other paw). Ranma screeched and barely dodged.

“Huh... Shui suppose that make sense. Cats already basically natural hidden weapon masters.”

“Why is Ranma so scared though?” Hibari asked.

“Alas it is a tragic tale!” Genma announced as he appeared with a microphone. “Many years ago I
put him through rigorous cat-fist training. Following the instructions to a T I placed him in a pit of
starving cats while covered in fish sausages. Unfortunately the training left him with a fear of cats.
Even attempts to repeat the process so he could face his fears only made him worse.”

“Where did you come from?” Hibari yelped.

“After seeing how you two were dressed I decided to follow to keep an eye on you. I don’t
appreciate the way you’re messing with my son’s head. Especially after all the effort I took to raise
him properly,” Genma answered smugly.

Ranma ran past screaming as a hissing Mousse chased after him.

“Oh yeah, a trauma induced fear of cats is really a sign of healthy childhood.”

“Okay, so I may have made a mistake or two. Nobody’s perfect. The cat-fist still remains an unbeatable technique.”

Hibari and Shui turned to watch as screaming Ranma had Mousse land on his head and dig claws into his scalp.

“Hm, yeah. Very unbeatable.”

“Just watch.”

Ranma’s eyes seemed to grow blank and he fell onto all fours. Suddenly an unearthly howl emerged from the small redhead. His hands seem to curl into a paw like fist and he batted Mousse from his head. The pair hissed at one another before Mouse produced yet more knives where his claws should be. The cat lept at the redhead, but was smacked away by Ranma without the latter even touching Mousse. Within seconds the tide had turned to the point that Ranma was playing with Mousse like... well, like a cat with a mouse.

Luckily for the battered Mousse’s sake Ranma was soon distracted by the smell of fish and other foods wafting in from the nearby food stalls. The boy-turned-girl-who-currently-thought-he-was-a-cat ran towards the yatai and began shredding them to reach the food inside. Genma posed to shed a dramatic tear.

“The only downside to this technique is he takes on the mind of a cat when using it. Words can no longer reach him,” the elder Saotome explained passionately as he produced a large sack. “The only way to break him out of it was the calming care of a kindly old woman who’d lived nearby. Unfortunately we were in Nagano at the time so there’s no way we could reach her.”

“Huh, so what do we do?” Hibari asked while watching the destruction Ranma was unleashing.

“I shall have to play the role myself!” Genma declared, rushing forward in a grey wig and very grandmotherly dress.

Hibari and Shui sat stunned for a few moments. They just watched in silence as Genma charged aggressively towards Ranma waving a cat toy. They weren’t surprised at all when the small redhead sent his father flying with a single swipe. Both knew enough to know that was not how you interacted with a cat.

“And he says I’m a weirdo for wearing dresses,” Hibari muttered before turning to Shui. “I’ll try to calm Ranma down. You go check on Genma... And Mousse I guess.”

Shui gave an agreeable shrug. The red eyed ‘boy’ wandered off in the direction both had flown. Hibari then moved cautiously towards Ranma, who was munching happily on some squid (purring loudly). Hibari slowly held out a hand and beckoned Ranma forward.

“Here Ranma. Come here. I won’t hurt you,” she said in as friendly a tone as possible.

The curvy redhead paused and turned to her. His eyes suddenly lit up and he pounced. Hibari was terrified for a moment, until she realised he had only knocked her on her rear and curled up in her lap. Nervously she tried to pet the little redhead and he let out a content purr. Finding it cute (despite
the context) she decided to scratch him behind the ears. The purring continued while he began to wash his face like a cat.

Hibari noticed Shui approaching, dragging a half conscious Genma and carrying a passed out little neko-Mousse. Cologne and Shui’s father approached from the other direction, the look on their faces making it clear they were glad they’d set up at a different stall location. Hibari didn’t want to upset Ranma, so sat patiently hoping he would fall asleep. The smaller redhead stretched in Hibari’s lap, and seemed ready to sleep. Just before curling up he turned his face towards Hibari’s.

And kissed her.

Chapter End Notes

Hey all. Hope you liked this chapter.

I just want to say, for anyone who wants more Hibari content, *Listen! I'm a Girl!* by Exceedingly is wonderful.
Ryoga felt his heart racing as he found Hibari in the fog he’d found himself surrounded by. He wanted to say it was due to rage and adrenaline. Oh how he wanted to believe that. He knew otherwise though.

“H-Hibari... I’m sorry for what I said,” he found himself mumbling. “I was just so shocked. B-but I know I’m in love! I can’t care that you’re a guy.”

“But I’m not,” Hibari replied, stepping clearer into view out of the fog.

She was wearing only a towel, and dropped it away to reveal a female form. Her hair was the same warm red it had been when he (accidentally) saw her naked before. Ryoga smiled like an idiot before moving in to embrace and kiss her. With his lips on Hibari’s and his arms wrapped around her he felt pure joy and let his eyes close. Then his hand felt a tickle as her hair seemed to spiral about. Not wanting to end the kiss he slid one hand up her back to investigate and felt a short braided pigtail.

Surprise that her hair had seemingly braided itself caused Ryoga to pull out of the kiss. As he did so with open eyes he was shocked to find he was holding Ranma. The shorter and curvier redhead was giving him bedroom eyes.

“What’s wrong? If you’re fine with Hibari you’re fine with me ain’t ya?”

“GAAH!!” Ryoga shouted as he sat up in his tent.

He hadn’t had a good night’s sleep since that date. His subconscious clearly wanted to play some sort of twisted joke on him. Even in his waking hours as he trudged across the mountains (whichever range they happened to be) he found himself missing Hibari despite himself. Any time he let that feeling last more that a few seconds Ranma would somehow slide into his thoughts. He kept almost wanting to give in to Hibari, but that felt like a the first step towards of path he didn’t want to head down. (Of course Ryoga was never the best at following the path he intended.)

* * *

Hibari sighed as she glanced at Ranma’s empty seat. Genma had dragged her fiancé away nearly as soon as they had returned from the beach. That had been five days ago. Her father had apparently agreed that Ranma needed some time away from Hibari’s ‘influence’ and had given them a week’s leave. Shiina found it an opportunity to be annoyingly flirtatious in the absence of Ranma which was making it all that much worse.

“Class, we have a new transfer student today,” Iwasaki-sensei announced.

“Another one?”

“That’s like one a month!”

The student in question emerged from the door. The new student was handsome with long brown hair in a ponytail and wearing a gakuran (despite Wakaba’s lack of uniforms). A bandoleer of spatulas adorned the outfit, and an oversized spatula was strapped onto his back. In his hands was a griddle which they swiftly plopped onto Iwasaki-sensei’s desk.
“My name’s Kuonji Ukyo. I’m an okonomiyaki cook by trade.”

As if to punctuate the point Ukyo began tossing out mini versions of the dish, to the delight of the class.

“Ooh, another handsome boy... let’s hope we get lots more transfer students,” one girl mentioned.

Hibari leapt to her feet, a smile on her face.

“Ukyo-kun!”

Ukyo froze and turned to her. There was a brief moment of digging through memories before a smile grew on that handsome face.

“Hibari!?”

* * *

Three Years Earlier

* * *

There was a nervous looking blonde at the front of class 1-4 at the Meiyo Boy’s Junior High School. Ukyo noticed their soft features and feminine hairstyle. Several of Ukyo’s classmates had noticed as well.

“H-hello. My name is Oozora Hibari. Please take care of me,” the blonde announced.

Even though she was using masculine pronouns Hibari’s tone was so clearly feminine Ukyo had to wince. In a school with hundreds of hormone driven boys who had no girls around the blonde was going to be in trouble if she couldn’t blend in better. Ukyo had to help her out. Maybe tell Hibari... no, Ukyo had made an oath. Ukyo could still help out though.

When school ended for the day Ukyo managed to catch up to Hibari while she was walking towards a bus stop. That Hibari had changed in the nurse’s office just confirmed Ukyo’s suspicions. Along with how the blonde swayed her hips. Ukyo walked up to calmly stand beside Hibari.

“You’re a girl, aren’t you?” Ukyo whispered.

“I’m that obvious? I thought it would take a couple days at least for folks to suspect.”

“So... what are you doing at an all boys middle school?” Ukyo asked.

“Daddy wants me to toughen up. I’m supposed to inherit the family business... but he insists I have to act like a man to do that.”

Ukyo nodded. That seemed like a plausible course of events.

“Well, if you want to get through this you will have to learn to play the part of a boy a bit better,” Ukyo replied.

Hibari turned to the brown haired youth. “Who said anything about getting through? I want to get out. I figure acting as feminine as possible so I get a whole bunch of admirers is the quickest way to get daddy to withdraw me.”

Ukyo was left in stunned silence as Hibari boarded her bus. It made sense though. No normal girl would willingly go through three years of a boy’s school. Still, Ukyo wanted to keep an eye on this girl.
“Come on, I bet we can get a peek,” the short boy whispered as he grabbed the doorknob.

“Are you sure? What if the teachers catch us?” his taller friend asked, though he was just as ready at the door to the nurse’s office.

“It’s supposed to be boys only here. So how could we be doing anything wrong?”

“Good point.”

*Slam*

Ukyo’s spatula knocked the shorter boy onto the ground. The taller one jumped away in fear.

“What do you think you’re doing?” Ukyo demanded.

“We just wanted a peek! Y-you get to talk to her all the time...”

At that moment Hibari poked her head out the door, now dressed in the gym uniform. “What’s going on?”

“Just dealing with some perverts,” Ukyo explained. “Some guys have no understanding of how to be gentlemen.”

“I’m glad you’re an exception Ukyo-kun,” Hibari replied. The smile she shot Ukyo made the brown haired teen blush slightly.

Hibari was very quiet as she nibbled on the okonomiyaki Ukyo had cooked. There was an odd melancholy in her normally cheerful eyes. Ukyo had rarely seen an expression like that in the little over a month they’d been friends.

“What’s wrong?” Ukyo asked, taking a seat beside Hibari and placing a hand on her shoulder.

“I got some news today. After that incident on Monday dad is withdrawing me.”

“Oh...” Ukyo replied, suddenly feeling a twinge of abandonment issues long repressed. “I thought you would be happy. It’s what you’ve been working towards.”

“I thought I’d be happier too. I am glad to be leaving this place, but...”

Hibari seemed to grow distant for a a few moments, despite the physical contact. Then she let out a laugh, and turned back to Ukyo with a few tears growing in her eyes. Ukyo’s heart seemed to melt a bit. Then Hibari slid in with a brief kiss on Ukyo’s cheek.

“It wouldn’t have worked out,” Hibari said, punctuating the comment with an awkward laugh. “Dad would never approve... plus there’s things you don’t know that would spoil it. Maybe if we were older I’d be braver, but for now it’s probably best this ended before it started.”

Ukyo was practically glowing red. Panicked thoughts were flying in the chef’s brain: ‘A girl just kissed me. Confessed to me. I should tell her. I should really tell her. But she’s leaving. With happy thoughts of an impossible dream. I can’t destroy that.’

“I’ve got secrets too,” Ukyo decided to say as a compromise between two warring factions of
morality. “You deserve better.”

* * *

* * *

Now at Wakaba High School, Ukyo sat nervously across for Hibari at lunch. The two had joined Shui on the roof. Ukyo was busy cooking up some food for all of them, despite Shui and Hibari both insisting they had plenty. The chef hoped that the familiar practice of grilling okonomiyaki would distract from the surprise of meeting someone who was basically an ex-girlfriend. Really, Ukyo’s first ex-girlfriend. Hibari meanwhile was appraising Ukyo, surprised how the teen’s face had matured softer than expected.

“So, how has life been treating you sugar?” Ukyo asked, wanting to cut the awkward silence that had grown.

“Well, even with other girls as competition I’ve still managed my fair share of admirers at school. Dad pulled me out of singing lessons. Oh... and I got engaged.”

“Engaged? Really?” Ukyo replied. “Good luck with that. It’s a risky business. I’ve... heard horror stories. One girl who was just abandoned.”

“Oh, poor girl,” Shui said. “That boy very bad fiancé.”

“I’m glad Ranma’s a gentleman who’d never do something like that,” Hibari added.

The spatula in Ukyo’s hand suddenly bent in two. “Ranma? Saotome Ranma!? He’s your fiancé???”

“Y-you know him?”

“Yes,” Ukyo replied, voice dripping with anger. “You should stay away from him. He’s bad news. Him and his father... they stole my father’s yatai. Our livelihood. Among other insults.”

“Aiyah! Shui no can believe Ranma do something like that.”

“It had to have been all his father’s doing,” Hibari said, trying to defend her fiancé. “That man is a slime. But Ranma has been as much of a gentleman to me as you were Ukyo.”

“Hmph... Ranma will break your heart. That’s his style. Get out while you can.”

“How long ago this?” Shui asked.

“How... close to nine years now.”

“Nine years? That’s enough time for anyone to change. Ukyo-kun, please, give him a chance. I’ll make sure he apologise... You can try to beat up Genma all you want though. Ranma and I would be happy to join in. But please... for my sake...”

Ukyo paused, Hibari’s plea chipping at 9 years resolve. Chipping, but not cracking. Ukyo had trained beside the raging sea. Had given up so much. All in the name of vengeance.

“I have more reason than ever to fight him. I can’t let him hurt you too,” Ukyo replied.

The bell marking the end of lunch ended the conversation. Hibari didn’t know what to do. She honestly had fallen in love with Ranma and refused to believe he was capable of something like that. Yet Ukyo had always been so kind and trustworthy...
Ranma’s hands hurt. Five days now of carrying around boulders, punching trees, and other ‘strength training’ was wearing him out. Apparently Genma thought he’d let Ranma get too soft after teaching him speed over power. And obviously since the Joketsuzoku technique Ranma had learned were both ‘feminine’ and speed based that just fed into Genma’s paranoia. He’d also made sure Ranma kept well away from any bodies of water. That meant Ranma was in rather sore need of a bath.

“Stupid old man... How is any of this supposed to change things?” Ranma grumbled as he finally snapped the old tree he was punching. “I’m probably a lost cause by now anyway.”

Watching it crash with satisfaction he noticed something bright red out of the corner of his eye. Turning a bit he realised it was ‘Co-chan’ pulling his backpack and umbrella. Ranma had to smile. He’d been wanting to talk to Ryoga for a while. Sneaking over he managed to scoop the little piglet before Ryoga could respond.

“Hey there. Bet you’d like some warm water?”

Ryoga nodded apprehensively. He didn’t trust Ranma, but did want to be human again. Plus he couldn’t really fight much in his current state.

Ranma scooped the lost boy’s pack (which felt surprisingly light, clearly the strength training was paying off) and headed back to camp. Luckily Genma had headed off to buy bus tickets back to Tokyo earlier so the two of them would have some time to talk.

The kettle didn’t take long to heat, and Ranma casually poured it on Ryoga. The other boy seemed to blush at being nude in front of Ranma and scrambled for his pack.

“Planning to gloat?” Ryoga hissed as he pulled out some clothes. “You and Hibari have plans to trap more guys in your web of crossdressing perversion?”

“I kissed him.”

“What!?” Ryoga blurted, utterly shocked.

“Hibari... I kissed him. I was a little out of whack at the time so I don’t remember it... but I know from how everyone freaked that it’s true.”

“S-so... you’re gay then?” Ryoga asked, still trying to piece things together.

“I guess,” Ranma replied, shrugging. “I was thinking that maybe the curse had done it. Messing with my head... making my brain for feminine...”

Ryoga nodded nervously, trying to suppress images of attractive nude redheads that were popping up in his mind.

“But you asked him out,” Ranma said after a moment’s reflection.

“I-I thought he was a girl!” Ryoga blurted to defend himself.

“He isn’t though. Least not usually. So that means-”

“I’M NOT GAY!” Ryoga shouted.

“Then how do you explain how we were in middle school?”
Ryoga glared at Ranma, not saying anything.

“I walked you home from school most days. We constantly teased each other. When I left you chased me across the ocean... If either of us was a girl that would be seen as super romantic.”

“Neither of us was a girl... then.”

“Yeah, but we’ve both fallen for the same guy. I can see in your eyes whenever we’re talking about Hibari that you’ve still got feelings for him. So we’re both gay... that means it should be counted like if we were a boy and a girl.”

Ryoga wanted to counter. To argue the point violently... but he honestly didn’t know enough about romance to provide a proper counter. He thought you had to know you were in one to be in a relationship, but he also hadn’t known he was apparently gay until now. It kind of hurt his head.

“Wait. Not that I accept your logic, but if we were a couple then... you dumped me. Now I have more reason to hate you,” Ryoga declared.

“What? How do you figure?”

“When you ran off to China. Abandoning me. That’s clearly dumping.”

“I didn’t run off. Pops dragged me off. I wanted to stay. Thought it was out of a desire to beat the pulp out of you... but maybe I was a little too stubborn for that to be the motivation?”

“So... you’re saying you never broke up with me?” Ryoga asked, an idea forming in his head.

“Never.”

“Then you’d say we’re still officially dating. Which means... I can dump you! Ha!” Ryoga announced as he jumped to his feet and laughed.

“What? You can’t dump me!” Ranma roared, leaping to his feat.

“I just did!”

Somewhere deep in Ranma’s heart abandonment issues flared up. Faint memories of a woman with a kind face and auburn hair waving goodbye. Tears were running down her face. He didn’t know what it meant, but he knew he didn’t like the feeling. As such Ranma lunged at Ryoga.

“No one dumps Saotome Ranma!” the pigtailed martial artist yelled.

The fanged martial artist tried to dodge, but found Ranma much too fast. Ranma’s fists slammed into him with both more force and speed than Ryoga was used to. His natural durability allowed Ryoga to take the blows, but no matter how hard he tried he couldn’t land a blow of his own on Ranma. The saving grace for Ryoga was how tired Ranma was after days of minimal sleep and constant strength training. It took maybe ten minutes for both boys to collapse panting with exhaustion.

“You’ve been slackin’ haven’t ya Ryoga?”

“Hey, you’re out of breath too!”

“That’s ‘cause pops been running me ragged all week. But you could barely dodge even with my form bein’ all sloppy. An’ ya couldn’t hit me at all.”

“Travelling like I do isn’t exactly relaxing,” Ryoga huffed as he pulled himself to his feet. “But I can
tell you that I’m not going to see you or your boyfriend any time soon. I’m going to leave your pervert nonsense behind me.”

Pulling his backpack on Ryoga stormed off as effectively as he could while exhausted. He needed to find out what sort of speed training Ranma had been up to. He could make up for losing the physical side of the day’s fight. Even if it would mean eventually tracking Ranma down again. The pigtailed genderbender however couldn’t make up for getting dumped. So Ryoga told himself he’d won as he headed north into the sunset.

Chapter End Notes

On the Ukyo-Hibari front: yes, it is a tiny bit contrived to have those two at the same middle school. However the romance angle? Basically inevitable. Look at Ukyo’s canon romance options. Tsubasa, Ranma, and Konatsu have some rather specific overlaps which Hibari definitely shares.
On the Ranma-Ryoga front: they’ve got no idea how any of this works and are jumping to wild conclusions. Most are wrong.
Ukyo let out a sigh as the school day ended. Hibari had been giving Ukyo the cold shoulder after finding out about the whole revenge plan yesterday. Ukyo had tried to assure her it was for both their sakes, but the blonde refused to listen to reason. The chef was frustrated and wanted to vent. The boxing club should have punching bags that would be good for that.

“So... You're an old acquaintance of Saotome-kun’s?” an auburn haired girl asked as she slid up to Ukyo in the hallway. Ukyo vaguely recognised her from class.

“What of it?”

Ukyo took a moment to study the girl's companions. The tall heavily built redhead was a bit intimidating. The other two girls seemed fairly harmless (if scheming). Also maybe a little close with one another for just friends.

“The name is Hanazono Kaori... and I was hoping you could answer a little question of ours,” Kaori stated. She then produced two photos and handed them to Ukyo.

The one photo showed a handsome black haired boy with a pigtail wearing a silk Chinese shirt. His eyes shawn the same cocky blue Ukyo remember from Ranma. The second photo showed a very cute red haired girl with the same hairstyle and shirt. Her eyes too shawn the same glimmer. If Ukyo didn’t know better from the eyes and attitude displayed they would seem to somehow be photos of the same person. But that was nonsense.

“So.... which one is Ranma?” Kaori asked.

“I-pardon? I don’t really understand the question,” Ukyo replied. “He’s a boy... How is there confusion?”

“Well, with that curse... we didn’t know which on is the real Ranma for sure. Turning back and forth like that with a little water. I wanted to know for sure. You know what I mean? There’s no real reason cold water should activate the curse rather than hot water.”

Ukyo’s eyes lit up. Vengeance. Beautiful poetic sweet vengeance. Ukyo decided to take a closer look at the photos.

“You know... I had thought Ranma was a boy, but... the Ranma I knew was a redhead,” Ukyo lied. There was a slight pang of guilt, but after what Ranma had done to Ukyo that warranted the vengeance.

The auburn haired Kaori’s face lit up with an evil smile. Her and her friends rushed off, clearly intent on finding a way to milk this for all it was worth.

Ukyo turned to look for boxing club while wearing a smug grin. It wasn’t enough to fix all the stress Ukyo was under, but it helped.

After knocking on the boxing room’s door Ukyo was greeted by Shiina opening the door.

“Oh hey, it’s the new guy... Can I help ya?” the tall lad asked.

“I need some stress relief. Can I beat up a punching bag?” the chef replied.
Shiina had to crack a smile. That was a sentiment he could understand. Of course Hibari had been a bit too invested in this new guy...

“Sparring’s even better for stress relief. Whaddya say we go a few rounds?” he offered. Landing a few hits on this bishonen would be very satisfying for Shiina.

Ukyo paused a moment to think it over. “Alright.”

Ukyo followed the tall teen over to the ring. Looking around most of the club seemed to be practicing at a pretty relaxed pace. Their technique seemed sloppy. Shiina tossed the chef a pair of gloves.

“Want some headgear?” the tall teen asked.

“I should be good,” Ukyo replied while climbing into the ring.

Shiina shot forth a number of blows. Ukyo dipped and dodged them with relative ease. Shiina’s movements showed potential and Ukyo felt it was honestly a shame someone with his natural ability was being held back by such a mediocre training environment. Ukyo decided to push back with a few punches as an attempt to push the taller teen to his limits. See if the potential Shiina had included learning quickly.

Ukyo’s clear skill soon began to draw the attention of the other club members. Gradually the formed a crowd around the ring and started to cheer. Feeling the match had gone on long enough Ukyo stopped holding back and quickly forced Shiina onto the ropes. Soon enough Shiina yielded.

“Eheheh! You’ve got the makings of a champ!” a raspy voice called out.

Ukyo turned just in time to see a small bald man with an eyepatch charging over. The chef barely dodged as the man came bounding over. The diminutive man seemed to have little understanding of personal space.

“You’ve gotta join the team! We’ll be regional champions in no time. Maybe even hit the nationals!” the man continued to ramble as some of the team members began to drag him off.

“You’ll have to forgive the coach. He’s a bit enthusiastic,” on the team explained.

“He’s right though! You’d be a great club member. Oh, the names Kaji by the way. Club captain,” a guy who looked a couple of years older than Ukyo announced. He had a square face, thick eyebrows, and an unpleasant nasally voice. “You should join up. Enjoy the freedom of youth!”

“Uh... That’s alright. I’ve got other things to keep me occupied,” Ukyo replied.

“Are you sure? We could really use you!” Kaji continued.

Ukyo was temporarily saved by the door opening. Everyone turned to see who was heading in.

“S-sorry I’m late,” a very pretty girl with shoulder length dark blue hair announced.

“Oh! The manager here’s!”

“Kawai-chan!”

Suddenly many of the boys were surrounding her. They were all chatting away. Ukyo noticed that Shiina didn’t seem very interested. The tall young man did seem very focused in pursuing Hibari. The focus seemed... somewhat admirable? Foolish though.
“Oh, who’s the new guy?” the girl asked.

“Somebody with the potential to be our new champ! Hey, Ukyo, come on over!”

Not having anything better to do Ukyo decided to be friendly.

“This is our club’s manager, Kawai Rie-chan. As you can see, she’s a real cutie,” a boy announced. He then leaned in close to Ukyo, “Single too. Part of why we’re always so happy to see her.”

“Er... it’s a pleasure,” Ukyo replied with a slight bow. “The name is Kuonji Ukyo.”

“Oh! The okonomiyaki chef. Lots of people have been talking about you. I heard you’re a great cook. Are you really joining the team?” Rie said.

“I might hang around from time to time,” Ukyo replied. “Looks like a good training facility... but I’m planning to set up a restaurant in town. So I won’t really have time to be a club member.”

A wave of disappointed noises spread across the room.

“I would like to borrow the ring tomorrow though. Saotome and I have... some things to work out.”

“Anyone who wants to work things out with Saotome-kun has my support,” Shiina declared from over in the ring.

Ukyo gave thanks and headed off. It was time to get back to work hunting for restaurant locations. Or at least that was the plan, but Ukyo barely made it around the corner of the school outbuilding when Hibari appeared.

“Not bad. Shiina was certainly no match for you. But he’s nowhere near Ranma.”

“I don’t usually go for unarmed,” Ukyo replied. “But I do know how to handle myself. Against Ranma I plan to have a few surprises up my sleeve.”

“Mhm... Then I’m guessing the odds are probably 4:1? Will depend on how tired Ranma is from his training tomorrow...”

“Pardon?”

“Oh, just trying to work out everything for when I start taking bets. You hadn’t done any fighting, so I really didn’t know how to balance things.”

“You’re taking bets?”

“My family are Yakuza. I need to get some experience with gambling if I want to take over the business. Plus it nets me some extra pocket money. I don’t like the idea of my two favourite boys fighting... but I hope you’ll both settle it like gentleman.”

Hibari started to walk off, but turned just before rounding a corner. The cute blonde gave Ukyo a mischievous wink. Then she vanished.

Ukyo then realised some questions about that curse Ranma apparently would have been a good idea.

* * *

It was dark before Ranma and Genma made it back to Tokyo. By the time they made it to Nerima even a few bars were starting to close. Neither Saotome was in much of a mood for conversation.
Genma however felt the need to list some critiques.

“You should avoid the beach for a while I think. At least until we find a cure.”

Ranma just ignored him. The younger Saotome honestly prayed for rain so he wouldn’t have to listen to the lecturing.

“We should think about moving you to another bedroom. Get you away from Hibari.”

“I like my room,” Ranma replied emotionlessly. “It’s east facing. The dawn sun helps me wake up early.”

“Not worth the downside though,” Genma countered.

“Shouldn’t I get used to be around him? Thanks to you I’m going to end up his... wife,” Ranma hissed.

Admitting he might be in love with the blonde was something that still made Ranma a bit uncomfortable. Admitting which role he would have to play in the marriage ceremony though... that sent shivers down his spine. Though Hibari would probably object too in all honesty.

“I’m trying to get you out of this,” Genma explained as they entered the Oozora compound. “There’s still a chance. We just have to find him a girl who would look the other way.”

“Maybe you just need to admit there’s been a pattern you keep trying to ignore. It’s always guys you’ve been pulling me from. Hibari. Ryoga. Ucchan. We just have to accept it... at least Hibari is the girliest yet. Not like I like it or anything, but apparently it’s who I am...” Ranma fumed.

The younger Saotome stormed off as his father processed that information. Had Ranma and the Hibiki boy actually... Genma knew Ranma had been too nice to the lad, but that far? Maybe Genma had been too harsh when talking about women and left the boy only able to respect other men.

It wouldn’t be until the next day Genma remembered who Ucchan was and he was left rather confused.

* * *

Ranma was barely half awake as Hibari walked him to school. He wasn’t looking forward to it in the slightest. School was annoying enough on a good night’s sleep.

“So, you knew Kuonji Ukyo?” Hibari asked as they neared the school.

“No? Ucchan? Yeah, I knew him. Was just thinkin’ about him this week actually.”

“Well, he’s at Wakaba now. Apparently he’s out for vengeance. Your father stole his family’s yatai?”

Ranma paused to think about it. He remembered Ucchan chasing after them. Ukyo was crying and asking to be brought with them. Ranma was waving goodbye as he rode off.

Wait. Rode off?

That was right. It had been the Kuonji yatai he’d been riding. How did pop’s get his hands on that?

“I half remember that actually. I always assumed pops had somehow bought it or somethin’. I’d like to try to make it up to him... but I think there’s more than that between us. I was rememberin’ some
of the things he said back then. I think he mighta been in love with me.”

Hibari raised an eyebrow. “Funny... he seemed to prefer girls when I knew him.”

“Wait... when did you meet him?”

“Middle school. He was the cute cook.”

“Well, if he was flirtin’ with you is that really evidence of likin’ girls?”

Hibari glared at the pigtailed boy. “He never had any reason to doubt I was a girl. And basically moved in as soon as he could.”

Ranma was left in quiet thought at that. Maybe he’d always had enough of a feminine side to lure guys like Ukyo and Ryoga in? Hibari seemed to be interested in his masculinity though. None of this made any sense to him. Maybe he was really somewhere in the middle?

Wouldn’t that be ironic.

* * *

Ranma had barely changed his shoes when a voice bellowed to him.

“Saotome Ranma! It’s time for justice to be served!”

Turning he saw a bishonen brown haired youth in a gakuran pointing a giant spatula at him.

“Meet me in the boxing club gym. Now!”

With that Ukyo stormed off.

“Couldn’t this have at least waited until lunch?” Ranma complained. “I was hoping to get a nap in during first period.”

The boxing club’s room was filled to the brim. Hibari was swarmed while collecting the mad rush of bets being placed. At some point she’d managed to set up a chalkboard and small booth displaying the current odds. Ranma however was swarmed himself by cameras and microphones. Wakaba had a surprising number of school newspapers (each of which had surprisingly high budgets... it had to be the only school with press conferences in Nerima) and none had liked missing out on Ranma’s previous fights.

Ranma was flustered and overwhelmed by the attention, not able to follow the barrage of questions well enough to answer anyone in his drowsy state. Luckily Ukyo pounced over from the ring and grabbed a microphone.

“This is a matter of personal vengeance! Interviews can wait!” Ukyo shouted.

In the crowd Tsubame was surprised that one flash had obviously been pointed at her rather than Ukyo. Kaji-kun appeared soon after with an awkward look on his face.

“This is a matter of personal vengeance! Interviews can wait!” Ukyo shouted.

There was a flash of light as the school newspapers all took shots of Ukyo.

In the crowd Tsubame was surprised that one flash had obviously been pointed at her rather than Ukyo. Kaji-kun appeared soon after with an awkward look on his face.

“Tsubame-chan! What a surprise to run into you here,” the captain of the boxing team announced. (He wasn’t doing the best job of hiding his camera behind him. Luckily Tsubame was still blinded by the flash.)
“My... future brother-in-law has another fight. I’m sort of expected to come,” she replied nervously. Kaji always sort of gave her the willies.

“QUIET!!!” Ukyo boomed over the raucous crowd. “We’re trying to have a fight here!”

All eyes turned as Ukyo and Ranma both leapt into the ring. Ranma was looking casual while Ukyo was clad in a traditional cooking outfit. Ukyo drew his oversized spatula and pointed it at Ranma.

“I’m glad you showed up as a guy Saotome,” Ukyo stated icely. “It’ll make me feel less guilty about this. You always were a tomboy, so it suits you.”

“What? Ucchan... You know I’ve always been a guy!” Ranma shot back.

“Oh really?” Ukyo replied with a smug smile.

“Look, man, I’m sorry about what my pops did. I’m also sorry I didn’t understand he was stealin’ at the time. There’s no need to make up lies like this though. You know I’ve always been just as much of a guy as you.”

Ukyo’s eyes seemed to grow cold at that. “Then explain our engagement!”

“En-enga-gagement?” Ranma stuttered in shock.

Fearfully his eyes darted towards Hibari. He wanted to make it clear he had no idea what this was. The blonde however was too busy being swarmed by questions as Kaori and her friends led the charge.

“Let’s stop talking and start fighting you thief!” Ukyo shouted.

Ukyo charged in, swinging the giant spatula violently. Ranma managed to dodge fairly easily. He was going to feel unimpressed, but then he remembered how easily he’d dealt with Ryoga just a couple days earlier. Apparently all that time dealing with the old hag had actually paid off.

Which meant Ukyo wasn’t that big a physical challenge. The claims about his past were the bigger issue.

“Ucchan,” he began as he dodged a spatula swing, “Seriously man... What are ya talkin’ about?”

“Maybe some nice cold water would bring you back to your senses!” Ukyo roared. “But you’d shrink so small I’d feel like a bully.”

Ranma managed to land himself on Ukyo’s spatula and crouched down. “You really couldn’t tell the difference between boys an’ girls as a kid? Come on man, it’s not that hard.”

The image of a certain blonde then flashed in Ranma’s head. “Well, not usually hard.”

Ukyo flipped him off the spatula and proceeded to throw a number of normal sized spatulas at him as if they were throwing knives. Ranma swerved and dodged, but found himself landing in a batter of some sort. A batter that was frying on the metallic outer portion of the ring..

“Do you like my glue batter?”

Ranma struggled to pull himself free. He managed to get one foot loose, but at the cost of his balance. His hands stopped his fall, but also found out just how hot the outside of the ring was as soon as they hit the dark metal. He bounced up in an instant with a yelp, left balancing awkwardly on the one foot still stuck in glue batter and blowing on his hands to cool them off.
“He turned the ring into a grill!” Shiina gasped.

The coach cracked open an egg to confirm the point.

“You know, that would really make getting breakfast easy,” the small old man mumbled.

“That seems so dangerous,” Rie said.

Ukyo then threw oversized noodles which wrapped themselves around Ranma. He lost his balance and was left rolling desperately to get off the grill. He was just slow enough that some of the noodles began to cook and some of the audience complained it was making them hungry.

“And now to top it off. Exploding tempura flake special!” Ukyo proclaimed.

The cloud of cooking ingredients and gunpowder began to explode all around Ranma.

“Ranma!” Hibari shouted, ignoring the accusative questions from Kaori and her friends.

Worried she bounded over the crowd to reach the ringside. As the powder cleared from the air she saw Ranma was still standing and let out her breath.

Ranma however was clearly furious.

“Insulting my manhood. Shoutin’ wild lies. And tryin’ to cook me? We were friends once Ucchan... so I’ll beat you to a pulp somewhere with a bit fewer witnesses.”

With that he threw a now cooked glob of batter into Ukyo, sending the chef flying from the ring and out the window. Ranma chased after. The crowd began to boo as Hibari chased after. She was now more worried for Ukyo than Ranma... but also had a responsibility to tell the betting pool to see how it ended.

“Stand and fight like a man!” Ranma shouted as he bounded after Ukyo across the open lawn.

A clearly scared Ukyo dove to the side to avoid Ranma’s flying leap. A few more blows saw Ukyo barely dodge. The chef went for a slicing spatula strike, but the move was countered by Ranma with a kick to Ukyo’s midsection. Ukyo’s grip on the spatula loosened and Ranma yanked it away.

The pigtailed boy decided to use the weapon himself and sliced at Ukyo. The chef’s shirt was sliced open by the force of the blow despite’s Ukyo’s best dodging. Hibari noticed with confusion that Ukyo seemed quite focused on trying to hold his shirt closed.

“I think you need to cool down a bit!” Ukyo shouted, producing a water bottle to splash Ranma.

The furious little redhead twisted the spatula in his hands out of shape. “You’re the one who drove me hotheaded with that grill of yours. All those underhanded tricks of yours... and you dare call yourself a man!”

Ranma slammed into Ukyo with a kick that sent the chef flying over the school fence and into a small bit of overgrown brush. Ranma bounded in after and tackled Ukyo. In the process his hand landed on a bit of chest that proved... rather soft. Momentary shock saw him receive a slap across the face from Ukyo.

Stumbling back the small redhead got a good look at his childhood friend and became very confused.

“W-when did you get those?” he asked, pointing towards Ukyo’s breasts.
“Puberty. Like most girls,” Ukyo replied flatly. “How about you Ranma? How long have you had yours?”

The small redhead stammered vaguely in confused shock. Ucchan wasn’t supposed to be a girl!

“Ukyo-kun... s-since when were you a girl?” Hibari asked as she appeared in the small clearing.

Ukyo blushed furiously. “I... well I’ve always been one. S-sorry for the deception Hibari.”

Hibari’s eyes turned towards empty space. “Can’t I get one normal boyfriend?”

“Anybody who wants to date you ain’t normal,” Ranma told Hibari flatly, having taken some solace in someone else being just as confused. He then turned back to Ukyo. “But, why were ya livin’ as a guy then?”

“After you left Ranma... I swore my life as a woman was over. I trained only for vengeance.”

“Ya gave your femininity because I left ya?” Ranma replied, before turning back to Hibari. “Would that work on you?”

“Not a chance,” the blonde stated flatly. “Wait... Ukyo was... was that engagement talk for real?”

“Yes... And I’d always thought Ranma knew. Just like I thought he knew I was a girl... I wasn’t hiding it when he and I knew each other, though I suppose was a bit tomboyish. At the very least I thought when I mentioned the engagement he’d put two and two together. It’s not like it makes sense for him to be engaged to a guy.”

“Ahem,” Ranma cleared his throat. Then indicated to Hibari.

The blonde glared at Ranma while Ukyo just looked confused. Then slowly realisation seemed to dawn upon her face.

“Wait... Hibari... y-your a guy?”

“Not by choice,” the blonde pouted.

“It’s not exactly somethin’ ya choose,” the small redhead replied.

“Look who’s talking,” Hibari countered.

Ukyo looked between the two and studied how Ranma was looking at Hibari. There was definitely something of a spark there. If Ranma was interested in Hibari then...

‘I can work with this,’ Ukyo thought to herself. ‘If Ranchan’s got a thing for crossdressers I can definitely work with this. I wouldn’t even have to girly up any. Probably.’

Ukyo stood up and grasped Hibari’s hand in a firm handshake. “Well, Hibari, may the best ma-er wom-er... fiancé(e) win.”

“Pardon?” Hibari managed to reply.
What’s the Difference?

Ranma had nervously run off to find Ukyo a spare outfit (apparently she had one in the locker room) which left Hibari and her alone in the area of brush. Both were silent for a while, processing what they’d learned about the other. They exchanged a few brief glances before Hibari finally worked out something to say.

“So... you want to compete for Ranma?”

Ukyo nodded. “I wanted vengeance for so long because I thought he betrayed and abandoned me. The engagement defined my life. I can’t just turn my back on it.”

“You haven’t seen him in 9 years. You don’t even know who he is now,” Hibari said, as a bit of jealousy slid into her voice.

“Can you blame a girl for trying?” Ukyo asked.

“When that girl is trying to steal the boy I’m in love with... and managed to make me think she was basically my boyfriend for a while, I think maybe I can,” Hibari replied accusatively.

“You made me think you were effectively my girlfriend too, so we’re even. In fact, I lost that since I swore I’d never let a guy near my heart after Ranma,” Ukyo countered, pointing an accusative finger at the blonde.

“I’d rather be counted as a girl. That’s how I think of myself. And how I plan to be once I get my hands on some of the magic that hit Ranma.”

Ukyo blinked in shock. Was that an idea other people actually thought about? Wanting to be the sex you weren’t born?

“Alright luv, I’ll count you as an ex-girlfriend. And just do my best to still see you as a girl,” Ukyo said with a warm smile. Slightly nervously she added: “And since you thought I was a boy you can count me as an ex-boyfriend if it matters to you.”

Hibari lit up with that smile which had so often warmed Ukyo’s heart. She quickly pulled Ukyo into a tight hug. “You don’t know how much it means to me to have someone still accept me as a girl.”

As the hug lingered a little Hibari then whispered in Ukyo’s ear, “You still have to apologise to Ranma for confusing everyone about his curse though.”

As Hibari broke the hug and back away Ukyo stared at the dirt. “I’ll admit... I probably overstepped a bit with that.”

* * *

Ranma was surprised just how empty the hallways were. Apparently after the combatants had vanished the crowd watching the fight had gone off to their classes. He expected more students to try to get out of class or be out looking for them.

He couldn’t complain, it made his sneaking into the boys change room despite his current form less stressful. It took only a moment to find Ukyo’s locker and open it with the combination Ucchan had given him. Normally he’d like the ease of the mission, but right now he rather wanted a distraction.
Ucchan was a girl. His best friend in his youth. A girl who was apparently in love with him and engaged to him. And who had lived as a boy for nine years. Who he had thought was a boy that was in love with him up until just a few minutes ago.

Between her and Hibari... he wasn’t sure he understood what the terms ‘boy’ and ‘girl’ meant anymore. A glance down at the rather large breasts currently on his chest just further hammered it home.

“What is this talk of ‘fiancés’ Kuonji give?” Shui asked while appearing from behind some lockers. Ranma swore he heard some jealousy in the boy’s voice.

“Apparently my pops agreed to something or other when I was younger... need ta go give him a good chat to find out the truth,” the small redhead replied.

“And Kuonji saying tongzhi is really girl? Is that true?” Shui asked, the tone of the question sounding guilty and conspiratorial.

“Of course not. You know from Mousse how Jusenkyo curses work,” Ranma replied defensively.

Shui shifted slightly and looked almost more guilty. “There other magic in world beyond Jusenkyo. Never know if someone have regrets and try to undo something with Jusenkyo... But then... your father has engaged you with two boys despite being boy, tongzhi Ranma?”

“Ucchan’s a girl,” Ranma replied before realising it. His eyes filled with panic as he processed his confession. “D-don’t tell anyone though.”

Shui nodded. “Shui is quite capable of keeping that secret. Already done with tongzhi Hibari. Funny how two of them found each other already.”

“Yeah. Small world I guess?” Ranma replied with a shrug. “I, er, have ta get this stuff back to Ucchan. I suppose ya can maybe come along? Just don’t peek. He’d probably not appreciate-she! She’d probably not appreciate a boy peeking.”

Shui nodded happily as the pair set off, but not without muttering something quietly in Mandarin. «Should go see what the competition is up to.»

Ranma’s Mandarin was somewhere between terrible and abysmal, but he had been making efforts. Afterall he was still partially planning to go back to China at some point. He didn’t know if he wanted to find a cure or help Hibari get a curse... but either way he was going to head back and didn’t want to make a fool of himself again this time.

Which is a long winded way of explaining Ranma was able to recognise the words ‘see’ and ‘competition’. He would have just assumed Shui meant as a possible martial arts sparring partner, except for that jealousy he was picking up from Shui.

As they crossed the school grounds towards the thicket which hid Hibari and Ukyo Ranma was left wondering who Shui was being jealous for. Shui had never shown jealousy towards Ranma over Hibari. Nor had Ranma ever noticed the reverse.

Maybe Shui had known the meaning of ‘date’ when asking them earlier. Could Shui actually be in love with both of them?

Hopping over the fence Ranma decided to put that on his ever more crowded back burner as he quickly found Ukyo and Hibari. Amazingly the pair were laughing.
“Ogawa-kun really tried to run for class president?” Hibari asked, giggling away.

“He didn’t just try. He won! Abe-kun and Tamura-kun managed to polarise the class so everyone was afraid to vote for the other. Poor Ogawa-kun had no idea what to do with all that responsibility!” Ukyo replied.

The two burst out into another round of laughter. Ukyo’s laugh was rather boisterous and masculine, though Hibari’s laugh was quite full too.

“Ahem,” Ranma awkwardly cleared his throat as he held out Ukyo’s clothing.

The pair turned and noticed both Ranma and Shui. Ukyo (who had been wearing her gakuran jacket loosely over her tattered *sarashi*) squeaked nervously as she pulled her jacket closed.

“Sh-Shui! What are you—I can explain—wait—uh,” a flustered Ukyo stammered.

“Gah! Shui!” Ranma shouted as he realised the Chinese ‘boy’ had followed him. “I told you she wasn’t decent! You should have stayed over the fence.”

“What is prob-Oh!” Shui replied, taking a glance at ‘his’ own form that confused both Ranma and Hibari. Shui turned around to face away from the crowd. “Sorry!”

Choosing to ignore the strangeness Ranma handed Ukyo her clothes, before turning away himself to let her change. A move which elicited some giggling from Hibari. It took surprisingly little time for Ukyo to wrap everything down and put the new jacket on.

“Well, now that we’re all decent, I think we should go talk to the Chairman,” Hibari announced, hopping to her feet.

“Wait, what? I thought you agreed I’d keep things secret?” Ukyo asked. “I could be expelled or something if this got out!”

“Don’t worry,” Hibari replied confidently as she led them back to the school building. “Chairman Akashi is an old friend of my father’s. They’re practically like brothers. He’s the reason I can attend Wakaba properly. Fair warning though... he’s a little odd.”

Ukyo nodded and followed, still a bit nervous. Ranma meanwhile had to roll his eyes. Of course Wakaba High’s administration was run by an eccentric friend of the Oozora family. It didn’t surprise him in the least.

Hibari knocked on the office door as the other three stood behind her and waited nervously.

“Occupied!” a man shouted out.

“Chairman, it’s Hibari.”

Ranma swore he heard the sound of a bath draining along with the other noises indicating a flurry of activity behind the door. After perhaps two minutes the door was opened by a short, yet handsome, middle aged man in a suit. His hair was surprisingly totally grey despite his looking only about the same age as Ibari (or Genma) otherwise.

“Come in, come in. It’s been too long my sweet lark. 100 years perhaps?” the Chairman said.

Hibari rolled her eyes as the four of them entered the office.

“We’re just come to let you know about a slight complication,” Hibari replied and pointed towards...
Ukyo.

“Ah yes, I’ve heard that Kuonji-kun gave quite the revelation today. Don’t worry Saotome-kun, I’ve had the paperwork ready to switch your registration to female for some time. Oozora-kun asked me to.”

“What? No! I ain’t switchin’,” the small redhead shot back, glaring at the man who was actually a sliver shorter than Ranma’s current form. “It’s Ucchan who’s got some stuff to explain.”

Ukyo moved forward and bowed politely. “I wish to apologise, but you see... I am a girl. I have attended school as male these past 9 years as I had given up my femininity in the name of vengeance.”

“Ah,” the chairman replied, fiddling with his mustache a bit. Ranma couldn’t believe how calmly the man seemed to take that. “Are you planning to switch your own registration over? That will probably take me a day or so.”

“I, well... I don’t really want to switch,” Ukyo said nervously, “For one, I wouldn’t know the first thing about blending in with the girls. I’d probably be almost as bad at is as Ranma.”

“Hey, if I wanted to I could blend in perfectly,” Ranma countered.

Hibari elbowed Ranma lightly before continuing the explanation. “We just wanted you to know in case any rumours or such started. Can you grant her the same protection I’ve got?”

“Of course,” the Chairmen nodded.

Ukyo turned to Ranma apologetically. “I also want to apologise for calling your identity into question. I was just so focused on vengeance...”

“Nah, don’t worry about it,” Ranma replied casually. “I’d have probably honestly done the same in your shoes. The Saotome school of Anything Goes is about using any advantage after all. I expect you to deal with the clean up though... I’ve already had enough of a headache with people here.”

* * *

After discussing matters with the chairman he had insisted the students return to class for the day. None of the four wanted to and spent most of the day squirming. There was a lot to talk about. Ranma wanted to catch up with Ukyo, but also had so much to discuss with Hibari. Then there was his realisation Shui was almost certainly interested in him romantically.

Then there was the matter of the wagers and the things Ukyo had said during the fight. The latter would be unavoidable at lunch as Kaori and her friends walked up to the four.

“So, Hibari... does this mean you’re gay?” Kaori asked.

“What makes you think that?” the blonde replied, not wanting to have to deal with this right now.

“Well, Kuonji told us about Ranma once and for all,” the auburn haired bully countered.

“I... the truth is more complicated,” Ukyo interjected. “I wanted to use the confusion of the curse to cover up a shame of mine... You see, when we were kids, I knew Ranma was a boy. Being best friends it was kind of hard to miss something like that...”

Ranma blushed in embarrassment to a surprising degree for his currently male form as Ukyo shot
him a nasty look.

“But my father, he didn’t know. Saw Ranma’s ponytail and was never quite certain. When Ranma’s father realised both that and that, for some reason, my father was looking to get me engaged already he decided to act. He claimed Ranma was a girl and hoodwinked my father into handing over our yatai as part of the deal.”

As Ukyo finished up the new cover story the four friends realised the entire class was listening. As were a large number of students in the hallway. Ukyo suddenly became deeply self conscious at the attention.

“Wait, if Ranma’s really a boy then why did you bring up the engagement?” the ponytailed Michiko asked. Her tone dripping with suspicion.

“Heh, well, Ranma was my best friend and... well, he’s got that curse now... and so,” Ukyo was clearly a bit panicked when she suddenly pulled out a water bottle and poured it on Ranma’s head. “Look at that figure! W-what kinda guy would turn down a fiancée with curves like that? Heheheh.”

Ranma went pale as almost every boy (and more than a few girls) gave their nods and comments in agreement. A panicking Ukyo then blindly grabbed and ended up pulling Shui by the hand along behind her as she hurried out to the roof. Hibari found herself half carrying Ranma as she hurried after them.

* * *

Ukyo had followed Ranma and Hibari back to the Oozora compound after school. She wanted vengeance on Genma. Something Ranma supported. Both of them had a lot of stress they wanted to work out and the part time panda seemed a good punching bag.

Genma proved easy to find, sitting lazily in a lawn chair in the shade as he watched the Oozora thugs run through katas he was teaching them.

“You!” Ukyo shouted, “Saotome Genma! I will have vengeance!”

“What? Who are you?” Genma asked as he dodged a wild spatula swing.

“Someone ya owe an apology to pops!” Ranma replied moving in to strike as well.

Genma was barely able to hold his ground against the two attackers. The clatter of battle quickly drew the rest of the Oozora family to the yard where the fight was happening.

“You abandoned me you jerk!” Ukyo shouted, “You stole our livelihood! You dishonoured me for all to see with that engagement to Ranma before you ran off!”

“Engagement to Ranma? But isn’t that a boy?” Tsubame asked, half to herself.

“That actually doesn’t narrow things down quite as much as it probably should,” Genma replied before a blow from Ranma landed against his back, causing him to stumble towards Ukyo a bit.

“I suppose that shouldn’t surprise me... Kuonji. Kuonji Ukyo,” she said, pointing a spatula menacingly at Genma’s neck.

“That name sounds kind of familiar,” Tsugumi whispered to Tsubame as they watched. Tsubame nodded, she recognised it as well, but from where?
“Ku-kuonji? But you were... you father insisted you were a girl,” Genma replied nervously.

“You rather destroyed my chance to live as one. Dragging my fiancé away with my dowry... I was a laughingstock! In shame I lived as a boy ever since.”

Furious she kicked the man square in the gut, causing him to stumble back into the koi pond. The wet and angry panda who emerged held up a sign.

#It was partly Ranma’s fault!#

Before he could write out further explanation Tsubame gave a shout of recognition.

“Hibari’s middle school crush! There was a boy named Kuonji Ukyo. And Hibari tricked the poor boy into being his boyfriend. Strange that there’s a girl pretending to be a boy and a boy with the same name,” Tsubame said, her voice suggesting just how little she believed that.

“It didn’t get that serious!” Hibari replied quickly.

“And we didn’t know the other’s secret!” Ukyo added, blushing furiously.

Ibari’s eyes lit up and he was beside Ukyo with an encouraging hand on her shoulder in an instant. “Haha, you are clearly the perfect girl for Hibari. A girl forced to live a boy and a boy insisting on living as a girl, what a pair! And you’ve already got a spark!”

“I’m here to win back Ranma?” Ukyo replied, severe confusion on her face.

“Ranma simply isn’t an option until the Saotome family debt is repaid. I can however make choosing Hibari worth your while,” the Yakuza boss informed her before turning to some of his men. “Seiji, Park, Kim, I want you three to help this young lady out with setting up her restaurant. Ensure she can get all the supplies she needs.”

“Help with the restaurant you say,” Ukyo said, her eyes seeming to light up with yen signs. “We might be able to come to a deal. Hibari is cute.”

“That’s the spirit my bo-er, girl,” Ibari replied, warmly slapping her on the back.

* * *

Ukyo had stayed for dinner. Seating arrangements had been changed to put her in Ranma’s usual spot beside Hibari while the Saotome’s were placed beside one another across the table. Discussions had circled around Ukyo’s restaurant plans, Genma claiming that Ukyo’s arrival was his doing and this should count towards the debt repayment, and prompting for Ukyo and Hibari to make date plans (Ukyo insisting that she had to finish the restaurant before doing anything else). Sprinkled in were disparaging comments from Tsubame about the household growing even stranger.

Unstated were the looks Ranma, Hibari, and Ukyo exchanged. Ukyo seemed to be saying that she would make up for it later. Hibari and Ranma both tried to seem friendly with her, even if she wasn’t behaving the best, while Ranma continued to give Hibari his best ‘we need to talk’ look.

It was only after dinner that Ukyo left with Seiji and the others in tow to work out the plans for the old and slightly dilapidated restaurant she’d bought. This had meant it was time for the youths of the household to work on their homework.

Which luckily meant Ranma and Hibari were alone in their rooms. Nervously Ranma moved over and knocked on the divider between their rooms.
“Are ya decent?” Ranma asked.

“I’m never decent,” a laughing Hibari replied. “You know that.”

Ranma let out a quiet chuckle before opening the door. Hibari was indeed dressed. She was seated at her desk working through some homework. Her stereo was quietly playing something synthetic sounding. Glancing over at case the cassette was playing was from a band called P-Model. Ranma made a note that he should really ask her for a proper lesson on music now that Shampoo was less likely to try to kill them when they went shopping.

“You’re stalling,” Hibari said as she turned her chair to face him. “What’s on your mind?”

Ranma blushed a bit, “I, well... can I sit down?”

Hibari nodded and Ranma placed himself onto her bed. He looked down and twiddled his thumbs briefly before turning back to Hibari. She was reaching over to pause the cassette player.

“So... I, er, kissed you.”

“Whenever I go neko-ken I never remember anything. Never know how long it’s been. Where I am. Nothin’. Kind of a weird feeling ta be honest,” he replied with a sigh, before straightening up. “But I’ve always been able to piece together why I did things. I never did anything as a cat that I didn’t want ta do normally. Except the meowin’ and runnin’ around on all fours bit of course.”

Hibari nodded hopefully. Was this going to be the confession she’d been hoping for?

Ranma took her hands into his own larger masculine ones. Hibari began to feel her heart quicken. It was really happening. The teens locked eyes as Ranma struggled for words.

“All my life I’ve done what my pops wanted. I’ve followed his dreams without thinkin’ about my own. I never really stopped ta think about what I wanted. But then you came along...” he took a breath as he prepared to make a plunge that both excited and terrified him. “Everyone wants me to stay away from you. Pops physically drags me away whenever he can. And still I keep findin’ myself comin’ back.”

Ranma paused again, though this time it was due to a smile growing on his face. “Finally I know there’s somethin’ I want, and that’s bein’ with you. S-so, I think it’s only proper I-I give ya a real k-kiss... ya know?”

Hibari wanted to melt into a puddle of pure joy. Of course she had to have the kiss first. Ranma had closed his eyes and was moving forward, but the pace was glacially slow as he turned redder and redder. The poor boy was hopeless at times.

Hibari quickly slid her hands up his arms and across his shoulders to link up behind his neck before effectively throwing herself onto him with a kiss. The pair fell back onto her bed and for a brief moment Hibari hoped this kiss might keep going into something more. She did have that packet of Nyannichuan powder she’d managed to save... No, Ranma would panic if they went too fast.

As they finally broke apart for air the boy in question had a dumb grin on his face as he lay under her. Hibari slid down a bit to rest her head on his chest while he just held her. Ranma worried that if he said anything more he’d firmly stick his foot in his mouth and didn’t want to risk though. Sure, he was probably going to be seen as just as much of a deviant as Hibari now, but it felt like a weight had been lifted off his shoulders. He was finally working out his own destiny.
Wings and Skylarks

Work on the restaurant was going surprisingly quickly. Ukyo had hit after just five days the point she expected to hit at about week two. Opening next week was a real possibility (which would be very good for her bank account). She was quite indebted to the Oozora family and very glad the payment the yakuza clan expected was just for her to go on a couple dates with Hibari.

As she made some measurements before the sun set the back door smashed open. Turning Ukyo was shocked to see a girl with blue-indigo hair up in twin buns rather than a gorilla or a bull considering the force involved. She raised a large club and pointed it at Ukyo.

“This is warning. Shampoo has been watching you. You stay away from both *airen*. Hibari and Ranma claimed. And no dare separate. They like boxed set. Belong together,” the girl bellowed menacingly.

Ukyo was momentarily outraged beyond words by the property damage and cost of repairs, meaning that once she’d recovered enough to give a comeback Shampoo had stormed off.

“Well, she’s as moody as Ranchan described. How on earth does Shui put up with her?”

* * *

Ranma had slept in and Seiji had felt it would be amusing to wake him up with a bucket of ice water. Unfortunately for Ranma the gorilla of a man had done so after it was too late for him to grab a shower. Which meant Ranma was having to head to school in girl mode.

“You really should let me do your makeup properly one of these days. I could get you looking really stylish,” Hibari giggled.

Ranma rolled his eyes and kept marching. Having such little legs made the walk seem so much longer. Wakaba High School was at last coming into sight when suddenly a tree hopped into his path.

Ranma was left blinking in confusion when a cute face popped out of the tree. Apparently an adorable girl with brown hair and flat cut bangs was trapped in the tree? Or... Rama really didn’t have any good hypotheses as the mysterious girl’s face gave him a once over. He felt a bit strange as to how long her eyes lingered on his chest.

“So you’re the fiancée? Hmph... I’m cuter,” the girl said.

Hibari had a strange feeling of having seen her somewhere before, but couldn’t place her.

“What is it now?” the small redhead asked, frustrated that his life had to be constantly chaotic.

“Just here to let you know I’m going to win Ukyo’s heart from you,” the brunette declared, pointing a branch menacingly towards Ranma.

Ranma felt rage bubbling up in his stomach, but didn’t like the idea of hitting some cute girl so swallowed to anger the best he could.

“Feel free to try,” Ranma replied coolly as he marched past towards the school. “But you’re clearly deluded. I’m far cuter.”
Hibari stifled a giggle. Especially as the strange tree girl hopped after them with a grumpy face.

“You are not. I’m cuter. You’re not even close. Not even cute at all. Ugly I’d say.”

Ranma’s eye twitched and the redhead flung around aggressively. “You take that back!”

“Nope. You’re ugly. Uuugly,” the strange brunette in a tree declared. “I’d be happy to prove it with a friendly competition.”

“You’re on, missy!” Ranma declared confidently. “I’ve only ever met one person cuter than me, and it ain’t you.”

“I’ll have it all set up at lunch. Just you wait.”

Hibari was in hysterics as the two of them glared at one another. She couldn’t believe Ranma was being competitive about a cuteness he usually denied having. It was too much.

Ranma huffed and marched off to class with Hibari following. They barely made it in before the bell rang, which prevented the option of talking with Ukyo to see who that strange brunette was. Hibari however was not above passing notes and tossed a scrunched up ball of paper at Ukyo’s head while the chef was busy taking notes.

Ukyo’s flinch of shock when an unknown something hit her face forced Hibari to cover her mouth and choke back laughter.

The chef took only a few moments to read over the note. Her face started out concerned. Then shifted to anger. Before settling on an amused grin. Her own note was tossed back to Hibari stealthily.

“Been chasing me since the last semester of first year at Meiyo’s. Kurenai Tsubasa. Such a headache,” it read.

Hibari nodded when suddenly the name and face slotted into place. She remembered Kurenai vaguely from her one month at the school. But that would mean... Hibari quickly tossed another note to Ukyo who calmly returned her own shortly there after.

“No. He’s not a girl. Unlike you he doesn’t want to be... I don’t think?” the second note read.

Hibari had to scratch her head. Ranma was competitive about anything and had that curse, but why would Kurenai put so much effort into looking cute if not to be seen as a girl? Hibari couldn’t wait until lunch to try and find out.

* * *

Heading out to the front yard a large crowd had already appeared as Tsubasa (who now wore a cute girl’s sailor uniform rather than the tree disguise from before) was yelling something and standing beside a sign of some sort. Hibari, Ukyo, Shui, and Ranma all approached apprehensively (the latter still in girl form so that he could win this competition) and could finally read the sign.

“Vote for the cutie! A chance to win a date the girl you chose!” it read while being adorned with two crude drawings. One was a severely unflattering picture of Ranma, with stink lines and messy hair. The other was attempting to be flattering to Tsubasa, sparkles and hearts all around drawn a style clearly trying to copy that of Tetsuya Chiba.

“Hey wait a minute!” Ranma announced as the small redhead marched forward. “I never agreed to
“Huh, so you’re too chicken to enter the competition?” Tsubasa replied snarkily.

“What? Never! I ain’t scared a nothin’,” Ranma declared boldly.

Tsubasa smiled and handed him a ballot box on a strap to match Tsubasa’s own. Both had a sign on them reading ‘Vote for a chance to win a date with me’. Tsubasa gave a smug smirk before turning to the crowd.

“The competition begins now and ends at the end of the school day. Enter as many ballots as you like. Only the winner’s votes will be counted for the dating competition! Start!”

The crowd of boys rushed forward in a stampede that looked ready to crush both members of the competition for a brief moment. It soon became obvious that the entire crowd had rushed towards Tsubasa however. Ranma was left standing with glazed over eyes while Tsubasa smirked.

“Off to a good start. I honestly figured you’d get at least one pity vote,” Tsubasa then turned towards Ukyo, “I don’t know what you see in her, but I’ll prove I’m the one for you!”

Laughing he ran off to collect more votes.

Ranma meanwhile collapsed onto his knees while his eyes looked perfectly dead. He was muttering something under his breath.

“Yeesh Ranchan, you’re allowed to lose at one thing in your life.”

Hibari was about to add her own bit of snark when Ranma’s eyes turned and fixated onto her.

“I... I’m ugly? I thought I was pretty... ain’t I pretty? I thought...” he muttered.

Ranma’s three fiancées blinked in shock at that.

“Y-you want to be pretty, tongzhi?” Shui asked.

The question seemed to shock Ranma out of his daze and he attempted a cocky smirk. “I figure if I gotta be a girl sometimes I should be a gorgeous one, right?”

Hibari found herself not feeling overly convinced, but decided to ignore the matter for now and focus on the present. “Well, you’ve got two options. Drop out and avoid the risk of having to date any guys here or... address the main issue you’ve got. All the school knows your love life is a mess. So they’re afraid of voting for you.”

“Mhm, they know Shampoo kill them if they try anything,” Shui added with the slightest of growls.

“So... a disguise then?” Ranma asked, standing to his full diminutive height and still trying to stuff down the strange feelings from before.

Hibari nodded before a mischievous smirk appeared on her face. “Makeup would help too.”

Ranma winced slightly before nodding. “Whatever it takes to win.”

* * *

Ranma dolled up very nicely. Hibari had handled makeup and clothing while Shui had handled the hair and wig issue. As they worked Ukyo had explained how Tsubasa had been obsessed with her
since middle school and how she’d sent a letter explaining her engagement along with a picture of female Ranma. She however did not explain about Tsubasa’s probable gender after a few whispers with Hibari. Conveniently the explanation wrapped up about the same time the makeover finished.

Ranma was the tiniest bit self conscious about the black floral mini skirt, tight red t-shirt with its plunging neckline (Hibari insisted he flaunt his main advantage), black wig, necklaces, bracelets, and fingerless gloves. He was even more nervous about the party makeup. However one look in the mirror he was impressed. With the bright purple eyeshadow, big hair, and general outfit he looked like a rockstar. A very beautiful rockstar.

“Haha, the only way the boys ain’t gonna vote for me is if they’re faint from bliss,” he declared with a smug grin.

Cheerfully he ran off to flirt his way to first place. As they watched the crowd of boys swarm around this new cutie (despite classes having started) Shui suddenly smacked ‘himself’ in the forehead.

“Forgot can vote!” Shui declared, running off to find paper to write down ballot entries.

* * *

The bell for the end of the day rang out, declaring Tsubasa and Ranma’s competition over. When the two met back up by the sign Tsubasa had set up during lunch both of their ballot boxes were overflowing. A crowd of boys were also present, hoping to find out if they’d won a date or not.

“I think I’ve got more,” Tsubasa huffed. “Even with you cheating and using all that makeup.”

“It ain’t cheatin’,” Ranma hissed back. “An’ I got way more votes.”

Strolling up Ukyo gave them both a warm smile. “You know, with you two running around all the time I never actually had a chance to cast my vote.”

Both dolled up boys turned to her, hope in their eyes. Ukyo pulled out a notebook, tore off a small paper, and wrote her name. Keeping eyes locked cooly on Tsubasa’s hopeful stare she walked forward and dropped her vote in Ranma’s ballot box.

Tears welled up instantly in Tsubasa’s eyes. “I-I... if that’s how you really feel, why didn’t you just tell me?!”

Before Ukyo could respond the brown haired cutie ran off balling. Concerned Ranma nearly chased after when he felt a hand on his shoulder.

“Ranma, let me,” Hibari said calmly. “I’m better with this sort of stuff.”

Ranma nodded at let her chase after. After all, Tsubasa probably didn’t want to see him after what had just happened.

Hibari would normally have struggled to track Tsubasa due to the head start, but the trail of ballots littering the streets made a very effective guide. Running through the streets following the literal paper trail Hibari eventually came to a small green space beside one of the many canalised rivers that crisscrossed Nerima. For a moment she thought she’d somehow made a wrong turn until she realised the vending machine she’d barely noticed was sitting on one of the swings.

Approaching slowly she sat on the swing beside and gave the vending machine a smile. (This felt so weird.)
“Tsubasa, I... well, firstly I want to make sure you’re actually in there. It would be very embarrassing to find out I spent five minutes trying to console an actual vending machine.”

There was a great deal of banging and clanging until Tsubasa’s head emerged from the flap of the vending machine. Tsubasa’s eyes were deeply reddened from crying. “Yes, it’s me. Shouldn’t you be off congratulating your friend Ranma?”

Hibari spent a few moments trying not to think about how contorted Tsubasa had to be before replying. “Shui and Ukyo can handle that. I was more concerned about you. And I think I need to tell you something about Ukyo.”

“That she’s a girl?” Tsubasa asked.

“You knew!?” Hibari shouted, falling off her swing in shock.

“Of course I knew. She was subtle, but in middle school I knew from the beginning someone as pure as her had to be a girl.”

Hibari nodded as she climbed back onto her swing. “Well, if that’s your taste, I’m sure you can find a girl out there for you. Ukyo might be taken, but you’re plenty cute enough.”

“Y-you really think so?” a hopeful Tsubasa asked, staring up at her with puffy reddened eyes.

“Definitely. You make an adorable girl and don’t let anyone tell you otherwise,” Hibari replied reassuringly.

Before she knew it she found herself being hugged tightly by Tsubasa (who had emerged from the vending machine disguise more quickly than seemed plausible). “Oh thank you! And yes! Yes I will. I had the biggest crush on you.”

“Yes to what?” Hibari asked nervously.

“I’ll make reservations! I shall see you tomorrow!” Tsubasa declared before running off happily.

* * *

Tsubasa stood nervously outside the Oozora compound with a cute, but modest, sundress and a large bouquet of dark red roses. He was reading the sign on the front gate over for a third time. Hibari’s family were really Yakuza? What was he getting himself into?

“Oy! What’re you doin’ loitering?” A thug demanded as he slammed the door open.

“I’m h-here to see Hibari!” Tsubasa answered nervously. “T-to take her on a date!”

The thug blinked a few times before giving him a once over. “Somethin’ weird must be going on, but come with me. The boss’ll want to see you.”

Tsubasa followed nervously and found himself led to a small mostly empty room to sit in. He began searching for places to hide, but was coming up short when two heavily built middle aged men walked in.

The one in front had curly hair, a mustache and wore a casual blue kimono and haori. The man behind was almost certainly bald (though hid it beneath a bandana), wearing glasses and a weathered gi. Both men sat across from Tsubasa and gave him suspicious eyes.

“You want to date Hibari?” the mustachioed man asked.
Tsubasa nodded nervously. “She’s cute, kind, fashionable, and just... the perfect girl.”

Both men exchanged nervous glances. The mustachioed man then spoke again. “And who are you?”

“Kurenai Tsubasa sir.”

“Tsubasa? That is a cute name,” Ibari said with a smile, “I am Hibari’s father, Oozora Ibari. I see no reason to forbid this relationship, someone as pretty as you... really what more could I hope for? Hibari is feeding fish in the courtyard koi pond last I checked.”

“Thank you!” Tsubasa replied, a bit confused by why he was being accepted but thrilled nonetheless.

He bounded down the hallway as soon as the men moved to let him pass and found Hibari stepping in from outside with a damp redhead Ranma grumbling behind her.

“Hibari! I’ve come for our date!” Tsubasa announced.

“Date? What date?” the blonde asked nervously as she dodged a lunging hug by hurrying into the living room.

The commotion drew the attention of Tsugumi and Suzume who were hard at work in the kitchen (little Suzume taking more cooking lessons so she could impress her sweetheart) and Tsubame had already been present, watching TV. Ibari and Genma entered through a different door and chuckled at the sight of Hibari backing away from the lovestruck brunette.

“You said I was cute! And could get any girl I wanted! Were you lying?” Tsubasa asked. “Don’t you want to date me?”

“I said you could find a girl, not get any girl. After all, most girls don’t have interests like that,” Hibari replied, tripping onto the table as she backed up a little too far.

“I know I can win you!” Tsubasa declared, leaping forward.

“No you don’t!” Ranma yelled, the small redhead grabbing the back of Tsubasa’s dress.

The sound of ripping cloth filled the air.

“Ranma! No!” Hibari shouted, however by that point the damage was done and Tsubasa’s dress was falling away as he fell onto the chabudai beside Hibari.

Hibari scrambled to cover Tsubasa with the torn remains of the dress, but wasn’t quite quick enough. As evidenced by Ibari having himself a heart attack and muttering something about white crocodiles in dresses. Tsugumi and Genma rushed to his aid while Suzume, Tsubame, and the red haired Ranma gathered around.

“Wait, so... Tsubasa’s like you?” Ranma asked, looking at a slightly nervous Hibari.

“Just what we need, another one,” Tsubame muttered.

“What do you mean I’m like her?” Tsubasa asked, standing up so the torn dress fell away. He gestured to his body (covered only by an undershirt and boxers). “Are you people blind? Look at my physique. I’m a guy. I just like cute fashion as a hobby.”

“Your body doesn’t mean anything?” Suzume replied. “Ranma’s a boy even when he has a girl body and big sis Hibari is a girl even though she usually has a boy body?”
Tsubame’s eye twitched and she glared at both Ranma and Hibari. “Good work you two! You’ve broken her!”

Hibari however was in a state of momentary bliss. One of her sisters had just willingly called her sis! Unprompted! Hibari skipped over and wrapped Suzume in a hug.

“You’re not broken little sis. You’re the only one in the family who gets it,” she whispered into Suzume’s ear.

“Wait... I don’t follow any of what was just said,” Tsubasa said, scratching his head.

“I’ll show you,” Hibari replied. She walked over to Ranma and produced the pocket sized electric kettle she’d bought a couple days earlier at a pawn shop. She flicked the switch so it quickly heated and then poured the warm water onto Ranma.

Ranma shifted back to his full normal size to Tsubasa’s confusion and amazement.

“W-what are you people?” Tsubasa muttered.

“Please, you belong to the same category as those two crossdressers,” Tsubame countered. “Bunch of perverts and weirdos.”

“I’m not a pervert!” three voices declared. Only Tsubasa had more to say, Ranma and Hibari having given up on convincing Tsubame. “It’s just a hobby.”

“A perverted hobby,” Tsubame replied before storming off.

“I... wait,” Tsubasa said, turning to Hibari, “So... are you really a guy too?”

“Hmph. No, I’m a girl. Just like Suzume said. I was just born sort of wrong. I’m working on fixing that though.”

“Fixing... how-er, why? You know what, no. I’m going to get a headache if I stay here any longer,” Tsubasa sighed. “I’m going home. I don’t know how Ukyo is dealing with all this.”
Ranma had to sit perfectly still. Moving meant failure. His nose had started getting itchy five minutes earlier, and now it was taking almost all his willpower not to scratch it. He twitched slightly, hoping against hope that would somehow dislodge the itch. Of course it did not. Was there anything else left? Maybe he could just scratch it quick and no one would notice?

“Okay Ranma, that pose is done,” Tsugumi announced as the egg timer began to ring. “I must say, you are a very good model.”

Ranma was so busy enjoying the sweet bliss of scratching the itch he almost missed the compliment. “Oh thanks. It’s no big deal. You’re always cookin’ for me and my pops and such. I knew I had to offer ya some sorta birthday present. And then Hibari told me that offerin’ to pose for ya might help out a bit.”

“It’s certainly more than ‘a bit’. Usually I would have to hire a model, which slows the whole process down and costs money. Or I have to draw entirely from imagination, which has its limits,” Tsugumi explained.

“Couldn’t ya get one of your dad’s men to help ya out?” Ranma asked, as he stood to stretch a bit.

“They don’t really tend to have... shall we say ‘conventionally handsome’ faces?” the eldest Oozora daughter explained. “I have used Hibari a few times, but I’m not sure handsome is the word anyone would use for his face either.”

“I’m right here you know,” Hibari replied as she peeked above her own sketchbook, sticking her tongue out.

“Well, you ain’t handsome Hibari,” Ranma replied. “You’re pretty... as ya can be with... well really just in general...er...”

Ranma blushed more and more with each stammered word. He’d admitted to Hibari that he loved her, but complimenting her around her family (or others who knew her secret) made him feel a bit flustered still.

“Can I see the drawings?” Ranma managed to ask, trying to push down the embarrassment by changing the subject.

Hibari and Tsugumi glanced to one another, seeming to communicate something with their glances, before turning back to Ranma and nodding.

“Check mine first, since it would be a disappointment after Tsugumi’s,” Hibari said.

“Now Hibari, don’t be so hard on yourself. I’m almost 5 years older than you and spend far more time drawing.”

“I’m not being hard on myself big sis. You’re just amazing.”

Ranma had in this time slid around to look through Hibari’s sketches for the evening. They were way better than the doodles he managed. He was curious about the outfits she drawn him in a few times. He let out a slightly chuckle as he noticed she’d drawn herself in beside him in some of those pictures. Only to blush when he noticed one doodle where she had them kissing.
While it was a bit strange to see himself in drawing form he quite liked how cute Hibari’s drawing style was.

‘That style would probably suit my girl side better to be honest. Maybe the next pose I should switch?’ Ranma wondered to himself. “It’s really good, Hibari.”

“If you want to give me private nude sessions that would be appreciated,” the blonde replied with a smirk that would have made Ranma flustered without the commented.

“I-well. That would be...” Ranma rambled as his brain overheated.

“Posing nude is traditional,” Tsugumi said in a tone so matter of fact she might be saying that citrus contained vitamin c. “But we won’t pressure you into that if you’re not comfortable. Right Hibari?”

“Yes Tsugumi,” the blonde replied reluctantly. She did however give Ranma a mischievous wink that made him suspect the topic might not be finished.

Ranma walked over to Tsugumi’s sketchbook, curious as to her style. The pleasant blend of realism and stylisation made her drawings looked amazing in his opinion. Flipping through he noticed she was also putting different outfits on him, and that there were one or two drawings where she played with his face just enough for it to look more like a brother he didn’t have. And she’d had some fun with his hair a couple times. It almost made him miss being able to let his real hair loose.

“Wow, this really is amazin’,” was the best reply Ranma managed.

“Thank you Ranma,” Tsugumi replied. “Now... I’m not sure if you’re open to this, but if you could do the last two poses in your cursed form I would appreciate it. It’s just... well, you have a figure very unlike my usual model for girls.”

“Sure, ya. I’m fine with that,” Ranma said as he walked over and grabbed a cup from Tsugumi’s desk to pour on his head. “Who’s your usual model?”

“Hibari actually,” Tsugumi replied. “He is very feminine. Also easier to work with than Tsubame. She’s very critical when I try to draw her.”

Ranma noticed once again that Hibari seemed to flinch a little whenever Tsugumi called her ‘him’. The redhead was curious, but had to finish posing.

* * *

Ranma and Hibari were walking to school the next day with the black haired boy turned to the blonde.

“So, last night when Tsugumi was callin’ you a boy and things, ya seemed to be wincing?” Ranma whispered. “You didn’t used ta do that?”

Hibari gave him a slightly broken smile. “I’d grown a thick skin to the nonsense my family said. Then you showed up and should have gotten them to open their minds a bit. Plus how I’ve managed to get my hands on Jusenkyo powder really should have gotten them to clue in... Suzume figuring it out must have finally broken my defenses down. Now my family calling me a boy hurts again.”

Ranma blushed a bit and stared at the ground. “I didn’t realise it upset ya so much. I’ll try my best to only call ya a girl from here on out.”

“Thanks!” Hibari said, lighting up and wrapping her arms around Ranma to pull him into a tight hug.
“But... if you didn’t know being called a boy would bug me, I have to ask: how does it make you feel when people call you a girl?”

Ranma’s response froze on his tongue. When his pops called him one it hurt, but that’s because he knew it was an insult from Genma. When shopkeepers fell for his cute act and gave him a discount he felt smug. When a well meaning mother mentioned how proud his parents must be to have a cute daughter however... or when a girl from another school complimented him while he was out...

“Guilty,” Ranma replied. “I guess I feel guilty. Cause I’m not really what they think. I’m like a joke... no, a mockery of a real girl.”

Hibari nodded and held him tighter. She’d suspected the answer might be something like that. She liked him as a handsome boy, but the blonde was preparing herself for the possibility that might not be what she was going to get. Or at least trying to prepare herself.

To be honest it was probably making her father happy that most upset her about the idea.

“I think you should talk to Tsugumi,” Ranma said as they approached Wakaba High School. “I’ll back you up. I think she’ll be reasonable.”

“I suppose it’s worth a shot,” Hibari replied, her mind still a bit distant.

* * *

Ranma was packing up his school bag at the end of the day, still having to wonder why Hibari kept giving him odd looks today.

“So, Ranma,” Haruki asked as he and Ken walked over, “Who won the draw?”

“Pardon?”

“For the date,” Ken explained.

Ranma stared at them in confusion for a moment until he realised they were referring to the competition with Tsubasa. “Oh, that thing. Well... It was only whoever got more votes that would go on the date. And... we never got to actually count the ballots. Tsubasa kind of spilled all of... theirs after all.”

Both of the guys looked rather disappointed.

“D-did you guys actually want to win a date with me?” Ranma asked, eyeing them suspiciously.

“Uh... nope. No. Tsubasa obviously. She was cute,” Ken muttered before the pair wandered off.

* * *

Hibari and Ranma came home from an afterschool roof hopping training session (which Shui had joined in) to find Tsugumi on the phone near the front entrance.

“Hello? Yes this is-” she began when suddenly Ibai charged down the hallway and nearly knocked her over as he yanked the phone from her hand.

“You! You’re that Umiushi brat ain’t ya!? I won’t have you making moves against my daughter! You creep!” Ibari half screamed into the receiver. He then spat onto the phone, before inflating a paper bag and popping it (apparently an attempt to deafen whoever was on the other end). “Call here again and I’ll kill ya! Don’t use it being her birthday as an excuse!”
He then threw the received back towards the base of the phone. A move which failed to hang it up as
the receiver bounced off the wall and was left dangling by its cord. Frustrated the Oozora father
marched back over to the phone and hung it up properly. He then turned to glare at Tsugumi.

“You’re usually such a good daughter. I can’t believe you’re dating that slime from a horrid family. You
know we’ve had a feud with the Umiushis since your grandfather’s days!”

“Let Tsugumi follow her heart!” Tsubame yelled, rushing to defend her big sister.

“Yeah! You’re being stupid daddy!” Suzume added as she charged forward too. “On her birthday
too!”

Hibari knew she had to hold herself back. Her sisters might manage to convince father, but if she
joined in he’d refuse for sure.

Instead she watched as his face twisted up. Suddenly her father exploded on her sisters.

“No! I won’t allow it! This is a matter of family honour!” Ibari bellowed.

Genma appeared around the corner of the hallway and began nodding sagely. “Family honour is the
most important form of honour.”

Both stocky fathers proceed to ensure their sagely nodding was in sync.

* * *

“The Umiushi’s over in Musashino have indeed been rivals of the Oozora’s for years,” Sabu
explained to Ranma and Suzume. “I really wish Tsugumi hadn’t chosen the son and heir to that
family for her first proper boyfriend.”

“Her first?” Ranma asked. She’d seemed much more aware of romance than that to Ranma.

“She’s a late bloomer,” Hibari said with a wink.

“It’s more that most of the other young men have been scared away by the Oozora family business,”
Sabu corrected.

“I think you had a hand in scaring away more than a few of them, didn’t you Sabu?” Hibari replied
cheekily.

The slick yakuza enforcer blushed. “Hmph. Well, I had to see what they were made of. If they could
really handle the family.”

“Yep. Of course. Nothing personal,” Hibari giggled. “You know... if you think about it Tsugumi and
Bunta-san are just like Romeo and Juliet.”

“Romeo and Juliet?” Suzume asked, turning to Ranma.

“Don’t ask me,” the pigtailed boy replied with a shrug.

“You don’t know the tale of Romeo and Juliet? Ranma... I am so disappointed,” Hibari replied
mournfully. Then she lit up. “Luckily I can explain. Follow me!”

Ranma and Suzume hurried after her as Hibari marched into the house with her long legs. They
quickly reached her room where she’d set up a miniature theatre. The blonde ran behind the theatre
box while Ranma and Suzume sat down to watch.
“In the exotic distant land of Italy,” Hibari’s voice began, taking the tone of a dramatic narrator. “There lived a handsome young man named Romeo.”

Up popped a puppet with black hair and a pigtail.

“As well as a beautiful girl named Juliet.”

A blonde puppet appeared.

“The pair soon met and fell in love at first sight,” Hibari explained. The two puppets kissed. “But alas, their snobby families had a silly old feud about something or other. It was so old and silly no one even remembered how it started. The young lovers knew they had to keep their romance secret, but found a priest to marry them in a clandestine ceremony.”

“Alas! While heading to inform his friends,” Hibari continued, producing a pair of puppets which looked like Shui and Ukyo, “The vile Tybalt, cousin of Juliet, started a fight and slew Mercutio!”

A pompadoured puppet with a long face that could only be Shiina appeared with a toy sword and knocked the Ukyo puppet out of the theatre box.

“Outraged Ra-er, Romeo took up Mercutio’s blade and slew Tybalt in vengeance,” Hibari explained, dropping Shiina’s puppet on the floor unceremoniously. “But then he realised having committed murder his life was forfeit! Romeo had no choice but to flee the city.”

“While she worried for her poor love Juliet’s parents announced plans to wed her to another! Distraught Juliet turned to the priest who offered her a potion which could fake her death. She took the potion to escape her parent’s watchful eyes, while word was to be sent to Romeo to tell him to save her. Alas! Word of Juliet’s apparent demise reached Romeo before the truth did and he ran to see for himself.”

Hibari brought the Ranma puppet over to her own puppet which lay on its back.

“Poor Romeo was too early and thought Juliet had truly died. And so Romeo produced a vial of poison, drinking it to be with Juliet in death.”

The Ranma puppet died dramatically. Then suddenly the Hibari puppet sat up.

“Yet Juliet’s false death ended mere moments later. Grieving she drew Romeo’s dagger and pierced her own delicate breast!” Hibari announced, her voice hitting a truly dramatic crescendo.

“But the potion wasn’t enough to kill Romeo. He revived due to his dormant alien biology. Distraught he knew his only comfort left was to go forth and fight crime,” Genma added from the doorway.

“That’s not what happened!” Hibari shouted, popping up into the frame of the puppet theatre. Insulting tails of tragic romance was not something Hibari would stand for.

“It isn’t?” Genma asked defensively. “Are you trying to tell me Romeo wasn’t from the planet Krypton.”

“He wasn’t!” Hibari harrumphed.

“Then why were they ‘star crossed lovers’ if neither of them crossed the stars?” Genma countered authoritatively.
Hibari was floored by his reply, Ranma and Suzume left with only a view of her feet sticking up through the puppet theatre. Well, that and her moan of frustration.

** * **

Hibari and Ranma were headed to discuss matters of gender with Tsugumi when they both heard a noise from the courtyard and froze. It sounded like whoever was out there was climbing the tree near Tsugumi’s window.

As they listened Tsubame and Suzume both emerged nervously from their respective rooms. Both looked to Hibari and Ranma for protection. Ranma was more than a little annoyed considering how poorly Tsubame tended to treat the both of them.

The sound of calm talking from Tsugumi’s room rose Hibari’s interest too much for her to stay hidden and she cracked the door open.

“Oh! Bunta-san,” she loudly whispered.

Three curious Oozora girls and one curious Saotome boy hurried into Tsugumi’s room, curious to meet Tsugumi’s forbidden love.

A handsome man in his early twenties was what they found. His jacket and shirt looked fairly expensive and fashionable, while his hair was well kept. He gave the sudden crowd an awkward smile.

“Hello. You must be Suzume,” he said to the young blue haired girl before looking to the three teens. “I... I’m not entirely sure which is which for you three.”

A slightly flustered Tsugumi moved forward to point them out, “Tsubame. Hibari. Ranma.”

Tsubame shot Bunta a nasty glare the whole time.

Bunta nodded. “Well, it’s good to meet you four. I wish it was under better circumstances. You see, my father has managed to arrange a political marriage for me with the daughter of a CEO.”

“Oh, Bunta-kun,” Tsugumi said softly as she took his hand. “What can we do?”

Bunta raised her hand to his face and kissed it softly. “We should elope.”

“Elope!?” Suzume squeaked. The smallest Oozora teared and grabbed Hibari’s hands. “They’re going to elope! Elope! So romantic!”

“I know, I know,” Hibari replied happily.

Suzume then turned to Ranma, “Can you believe it? Eloping!”

Ranma scratched the back of his neck nervously. “Yeah, I heard.”

Suzume then turned to a third figure in the room. “They’re eloping da-Daddy!?”

Everyone froze as they realised Ibari had slid silently into the room.

“You. Umiushi. I told you I would kill you if you phoned us ever again. Did you really think the punishment for trespassing on my family’s ancestral home would be lighter!?” Ibari roared.

“Ancestral? Daddy, we all know grandpa grabbed this place during the war after the Americans
bombed the local land registry,” Hibari replied flatly.

“You stay out of this!” Ibari yelled, his aura flaring up to give the impression of some sort of fanged kaiju.

If he wasn’t on such a back footing with everything going on Ranma would have admired the control displayed. Usually only top level martial artists like his father could manage such vibrant battle auras.

“Y-you know, I... I’ve got a, er, doctor’s appointment in the morning,” Bunta stammered as he backed towards the window. “I-it was good meeting you. Bye!”

“You had better run! Coward!” Ibari replied, returning his form to normal while drawing a rifle to fire at Bunta’s retreating form.

Luckily for the young man fleeing across the courtyard Ibari was too furious to bother aiming properly. He was furthered saved by a furious Hibari producing a pistol and firing a shot squarely at her father. When the man collapsed Suzume shrieked.

“Oh no! Hibari killed daddy!” the small blue haired girl cried.

“Nah, it’s just a rubber bullet,” Hibari replied. “He’s fine. Will probably just have a nasty goose egg.”

To prove her point the mustachioed Yakuza boss rose to his feet and glared at her. “The insolence! Why was I cursed to have such a disrespectful pervert for my only son!?”

“For the millionth time, I’m not a pervert,” Hibari sighed. Under her breath she muttered, “I’m not a son either.”

“Hmph. Just something a pervert would say,” Ibari replied before turning to Tsugumi. “I will have none of this eloping business. Do you understand?”

Tsugumi nodded and her father stormed off. After a few moments of silence Suzume spoke up.

“What does elope mean anyway?” the bluenette asked.

Hibari burst into a giggling fit while Tsugumi kneeled down to explain. “It means marrying secretly somewhere far away from family who might not approve.”

Suzume nodded. “Oooh. I knew it sounded romantic!”

Tsubame and Suzume decided to leave, the excitement was over after all and it was a school night. Hibari and Ranma lingered for a moment before Hibari shook her head. Now was not the time to bring her problems to Tsugumi.

* * *

A small damp redhead was grumbling as he opened the front door to the Oozora compound when a shadow fell over him. Turning around Ranma was greeted by the sight of a giant stoic samurai.

“Where is Oozora?” the samurai bellowed.

Ranma took a moment to process that the giant was talking to him. Thinking it over he realised this was likely a battle aura of a rival Yakuza boss.
“I ain’t in the loop,” Ranma replied. “Probably inside somewhere? I can go check if ya like?”

The giant Samurai snorted and marched into the home himself. The way the giant somehow fit into the house proved he was an aura rather than a true giant.

Out of curiosity Ranma followed the lumbering Samurai. It didn’t take long for the ‘guest’ to find Ibari.

“Umiushi! You’re not welcome here!” Ibari shouted as he stood up. Ranma noticed his father look relieved that Ibari had knocked over the shogi table between the two of them.

“You opened fire on my son and heir! That is a direct provocation. I have come for personal vengeance,” Umiushi roared.

Suddenly the form of Ibari shifted to that of the monster he’d been the night before. “Come try me then! Your son deserved it, trying to seduce my daughter!”

“Seduce your daughter? She’s the one trying to confuse my son! I refuse to let her near him.”

As the two would-be kaiju battled it out in the living room the rest of the Oozora family gathered to watch the commotion. Suzume clung to the back of Ranma’s shirt, but made sure to watch despite being afraid. (Ranma found himself admiring the girl’s constant efforts to push herself into bravery.) Hibari on the other hand chose to cheer the fight on. Tutting her blonde sister Tsugumi ran forward, intent on making peace.

“Please! Don’t fight. Can’t we talk about this like human beings?” the eldest Oozora daughter cried out.

Both men turned and were confronted with her innocent pleading face. Ibari shrank back to normal proportions. Umiushi seemed a bit reluctant, but gave in as well. As the illusion of his aura dissipated all were presented with the surprising cuteness of his natural face. His eyes sparkled and the slight stubble he had looked more like cute whiskers. The button nose didn’t help either. Ranma and Hibari were both stifling giggles when Ibari burst into laughter.

“Daddy, don’t be rude,” Tsugumi said, however her reprimand fell apart when she began to giggle as well.

Umiushi’s aura flared up partially, enough to cancel out his natural cuteness. “I wish to be taken seriously!”

“I’m sorry,” Tsugumi replied, bowing nervously. “But please, why are you so against Bunta-kun and I being in love?”

“It’s nothing personal,” Umiushi said. “I would be thrilled if you weren’t an Oozora. You’re a model young woman. Kind and beautiful. And got some good hips and a nice butt on ya!”

Tsugumi squeaked as Umiushi grabbed her rear. The combined elbows of Ibari and Ranma collided with his head and slammed him to the ground for that.

“How dare you touch my daughter!” Ibari roared.

“I don’t got time for perverts either,” a redheaded Ranma added sharply.

Umiushi stood back up, rubbing his head. “I’m sorry. Just got carried away. It is indeed a shame such a perfect young woman was born of Oozora slime.”
“The real shame is her being seduced by Umiushi garbage. If your son dares to try any eloping nonsense I will hunt him down. And kill him,” Ibari hissed.

“I won’t let any Oozora’s get near him.” Umiushi countered before storming off.

* * *

Ranma and Hibari stood quietly with Tsugumi, serving as bodyguards due to how late her rendezvous in the park with Bunta was. Really they should have been in bed due to it being a school night, but Hibari demanded they fight in the name of love. Ranma had to admit he didn’t much like someone else have their marriage decided for them after his multiple fiancée chaos so wasn’t hard to convince.

“Sorry I’m late. I had a feeling like I was being followed,” Bunta said as he emerged from the darkness. “I’m quite certain I lost them though, don’t worry.”

“Oh, Bunta-kun,” Tsugumi cried as she ran over to hug him. “It’s all so terrible. Daddy says he’ll kill you if were were to ever marry. He seemed serious too.”

“Heheh, really?” Bunta replied nervously.

“You’re still willing to act on your love though, right?” Tsugumi asked hopefully.

“I... Yeah. Definitely.” Bunta stammered. “But we obviously have to plan this out carefully. That might take a while.”

“I’ve got a plan already,” Hibari announced happily. “Thanks to Ranma we’ve got access to an old woman with all sorts of magic. We just need to grab a potion from her. Then we have you two write fake suicide notes and pretend to be dead while we hide you for a while as small animals that the potions will turn you into. Hopefully everyone will come to their senses quickly when they think you’re both dead.”

Bunta blinked in shock. “M-magic potions? Animals?”

“Yeah. It works just like Ranma’s curse, but only one time,” Hibari announced. To illustrate the point she dumped a water bottle on Ranma’s head.

Bunta almost fell over in shock at the transformation.

“It is strange, but I think it’s our best option,” Tsugumi said as she helped Bunta to his feet. “Will you try it?”

“Uh... yeah. Sure,” Bunta replied.

* * *

Hibari slid into the Neko Hanten just as it was closing up. Shampoo was apparently thrilled to see her from the tackle she received. Squirming out of Shampoo’s iron grip she tried to ignore the odd noises emerge from the other girl when her hands made contact with Shampoo’s chest as she wriggled free. Shampoo was left very disappointed as Hibari finished extracting herself.

“Where is Ranma? Odd for Hibari to come alone,” Shampoo asked.

“We need a little bit of help. I’m a better diplomat. So I came alone,” Hibari replied.

“Hoho, you need some help do you?” Cologne asked, bounding forward on her staff.
“Yes. Now, I know you don’t like me and you know I don’t like you, but I’m certain we can arrange something,” Hibari replied.

“You’re quite wrong my dear child,” Cologne informed her. “I do like you. Both you and Ranma are excellent marriage options for my great grandchild. If I disliked either of you... I would be taking alternative methods to deal with Shampoo’s marriage issue.”

Hibari froze up a moment. Her negotiation strategy had just been ruined. She was going to have to improvise.

“I will admit now, I miscalculated on my opening move. In my experience males are generally easily broken in... but neither you nor Ranma exactly fit the male mold. I’m quite glad I ensured there was a back up plan,” Cologne explained.

Hibari was busy following along and barely noticed as Shampoo took her hand and began to lean on her shoulder. Hibari was about to dislodge herself again, but there was a genuineness to Shampoo’s smile that gave her pause. How in the world had Shampoo fallen in love with her?

“Shampoo is reasonably happy with the course of events as well. So, as an effort to atone for my initial error, I will help you with whatever you need,” Cologne said.

“Well then, do you have any animal type instant Jusenkyo powder?”

“Hoho, I do indeed. A few types.”

* * *

Hibari watched the rain coming down nervously. Tsugumi was hopefully with Bunta by now. They would fake their deaths and return to the compound in animal forms. It was dramatic, but then again, so were both of their fathers.

When the door to her room slammed open Hibari was shocked to see a soaked and crying Tsugumi.

“H-he never showed up,” Tsugumi stammered between the sobs.

Hibari ran over to hug her sister when the divider to Ranma’s room slid open. She noticed Ranma seemed just as outraged as she felt. Ranma rushed forward as well, placing a hand reassuringly on Tsugumi’s shoulder.

“We’ll find out where he’s hiding,” Ranma said, anger clear in his voice.

“He isn’t hiding,” Sabu stated as he appeared silently at the door. “He went through with the political wedding his father planned. I can give you the address.”

Hibari’s eyes filled with fire. “Good. I have a plan.”

* * *

Bunta was a bit overwhelmed by the wedding party. To think they’d gathered on so little notice. And the bride was much prettier than he’d feared. Tsugumi may have been a nice girl, but this was just so much easier.

Rather than worrying about his life he just had to remember the names of different relatives as they congratulated him.

“Thank you uncle Haru. You’re too kind uncle Touma. Thank you aunt Yui. It’s great to see you
Bunta froze. Hibari!? And who was the angry redhead beside her in a matching dress...Ranma!?

“We’re a little late, but we’ve got two gifts for ya,” Ranma announced, before punching Bunta square in the nose.

Shocked gasps evolved into shrieks of panic when Hibari produced an uzi and pointed it at the hunched over groom. “Here’s number two.”

Instead of the spray of lead that he expected to end his life there was a splash of water. Bunta was frozen in shock as the world shifted and grew. Falling into his clothes he was scarcely aware of the panic around him. When the strange tingling finally stopped Bunta found himself letting out a confused quack.

* * *

“I can’t believe they really make water guns that realistic,” Ranma said with a laugh as the pair rushed home across rooftops.

“Sometimes you really have to hand it to the Americans. They’ve got wonderfully terrible ideas from time to time,” Hibari replied, giggling as she held her skirt down.

The pair came to a stop as they safely crossed back into Oozora turf.

“I wonder how long it’ll take them to reverse the transformation. We never did tell him how that works,” Ranma said, still laughing with the adrenaline rush.

Hibari just gave a light shrug before properly taking in the sight of her fiancé lit softly by the streetlights below. She couldn’t help but blush at the way the redhead’s panting caused that generous chest to move. Or how Ranma’s sweat seemed to make him shimmer. There was no point in denying it... Hibari liked both Ranma’s forms.

“You look really cute in a dress, you know that?” Hibari said softly.

Ranma blushed, trying to stammer a defense. Eventually a coherent sentence escaped his lips: “I’m a guy.”

Hibari leaned in to whisper in his ear. “Only if you want to be.”

Ranma almost leapt out of his skin. “We need ta get to bed! It’s a school night! An I never shoulda worn this thing anyway. Could run faster in a suit!”

Ranma was bounding off towards the Oozora compound before Hibari could get a reply in. She was left to pout for a moment before chasing after him.
Ranma lay on his bed reading through his assigned English reading. Iwasaki-sensei had made sure that he was given a copy of *Anne of Green Gables* for their novel reading assignment when she found out he’d not yet read it. He’d wondered why she’d insisted so much (and why Hibari kept giggling) until he read enough to find out that the story involved a pigtailed redhead sent in place of a boy by mistake. He’d almost put the book down for good thinking his teacher was having some sort of joke at his expense, but then remembered he had to write a report for marks and so relented to read it. To his surprise he found himself actually invested.

Though not too invested to notice Hibari sliding into his room by way of the divider. He stuck a bookmark in place and then turned towards the cute blonde. She was holding something behind her back and wore the smirk he’d fallen so in love with.

“Okay, what do you have behind your back?” Ranma asked as she approached him.

“Well, I know you like undershirts. So... I bought you a special scientifically designed one. It was made for athletes specifically,” Hibari explained.

“A scientific undershirt? That’s a thing?”

“Will you try it on? For me at least?” Hibari asked innocently.

He knew something was up but nodded. (Hibari was never actually that innocent.) “Alright.”

Ranma removed his current shirt and undershirt and then held his hand out. Hibari seemed at least a little distracted for a moment.

“Sorry, just enjoying the view,” she giggled before handing the garment she’d held behind her back until now over.

“This seems kinda lacking in material,” Ranma muttered as he started trying to put it on. It was a surprisingly elastic and tricky to manage.

“It’s stretches to cover everything needed,” Hibari replied. She was however giggling furiously by this point.

Ranma grunted a bit as he pulled it on. “Hmph. I can’t pull it down any lower than che-wait a minute. Is this a bra!?"

Hibari nodded between giggles and then splashed him with a nearby glass of water. Her giggles turned into a full laugh.

Ranma’s eye twitched. While the small redhead wasn’t really angry by any definition of the word he was annoyed and embarrassed. Which meant he felt Hibari deserved to suffer a similar annoyance. Noogies seemed a good option.

The sly smile on his face must have been a give away as Hibari managed to dodge his initial tackle attempt. Her speed had only increased with the training he’d been giving her and she was proving remarkably effective at dodging as he chased her around their two rooms. The chase lasted perhaps a minute or two until Ranma stopped, having come to a realisation.

Staring down at his generously sized chest the redhead jumped in place a few times and noted how
everything stayed (reasonably) in place. The sensation was such a pleasant shift from usual he could help but smile.

“Hey, this thing actually does help,” the curvy teen announced with a smile.

“That’s kind of the point of it,” Hibari replied flatly.

“I thought bras were just to make things look cute. This actually does somethin’. And isn’t frilly or nothin’.”

“Of course. I knew what the easiest type to get you to try was. I put some slightly more fun options in your dresser if you’re feeling adventurous though.”

“I’m not sure-wait, what do you mean fun?” Ranma asked, looking up judgmentally at the blonde.

“Go take a peek,” Hibari said with a wink.

Ranma nervously walked over and opened his underwear drawer. His six or so boxers were folded efficiently in one corner. Added in were at least a dozen pairs of colourful girl’s underwear (mostly red) and three other bras. One was designed with similar sporty efficiency to the bra he was wearing. The other two were significantly lacier.

“One of them is a push up,” Hibari explained. “I’m mostly just curious as to how it would look considering how big your boobs are already.”

Ranma turned and gave her a flat stare. “I ain’t wearin’ anything lacy. And what am I supposed to do with girl’s underwear? One splash a hot water and things’ll be real uncomfortable.”

“Nah, those are boyshorts. Really comfortable really either way.”

“Either way? How do-” Ranma froze up. In all his time with Hibari, even when trying (and generally failing) to think of her as a boy, he’d never actually realised certain bits of anatomy were present. “Oh. Riiight. You do know.”

Hibari raised an eyebrow before lighting up and giving the redhead a tight hug. “Oh Ranma, you’re so cute sometimes.”

“T’m still gettin’ used to... both of our situations to be honest,” Ranma replied. “We’re a kinda complicated couple... I still ain’t gonna wear that lacy stuff though.”

* * *

Ukyo was smiling as she watched Seiji and Park slide the sign for Ucchan’s into place. She’d have liked to have her grand opening tomorrow now that the restaurant was finished. However, as part of the deal with the Oozora group she had other obligations to handle first. Still, she was getting to open so much earlier than planned she was thrilled.

“Seiji-san, Park-san, you b’y’s have both been such a big help. Both of you can eat for free my first month of business. Heck, I owe all of the Oozora group. Tell the rest of them they’ll get their first meal free from me,” the chef said, beaming.


“It’s the least I can do after you guys helped out so much,” Ukyo replied warmly. Not having to actually pay them made her life so much easier. “Now...I really should get some clothes picked out
for my date tomorrow now. I’ll see you guys Friday for the opening.”

Ukyo waved the two men off before heading upstairs. She really did have to think about what to wear. Her usual gakuran just wouldn’t do for a date... even a forced one with her ex. She had standards after all.

* * *

Ranma, Hibari, Ukyo, and Shui sat on the roof eating lunch. There was an awkward tension in the air as Ukyo received glares from both Ranma and Shui. Eventually it was too much for her.

“Listen, it’s not my idea to call this romantic. Oozora-san’s help makes running my restaurant massively easier and that’s that. So why don’t you guys just let me treat this as a friendly meetup?” Ukyo asked.

Ranma and Shui both muttered quiet responses and turned back to their lunches. Hibari was finding the whole thing annoying. Couldn’t they just have a civil conversation? Clearly they needed to discuss someone who wasn’t present.

“So, Shui... I was at the Neko Hanten the other day and Shampoo seemed genuinely happy to see me. Despite the fact neither I nor Ranma are ever all that nice to her,” Hibari said. “Which got me wondering why she’d have gotten so smitten. I could only think of one reasonable answer, and I thought I should ask you your opinion.”

“Shui is happy to try to help.”

“Thanks,” Hibari replied with a warm smile. “So... do you know if Shampoo’s a lesbian?”

Shui nearly choked on ‘his’ noodles. “Gack... why do you think that!”

Ranma likewise wore a face of shock.

“Well she’s legally obligated to marry Ranma and me, so I’d expected resentment. Especially since we don’t get along. The only thing I can see that would make her happy with the situation is both Ranma and I have feminine charms, which she probably couldn’t have even hoped for from a husband normally,” Hibari explained.

“That... maybe makes sense? Shui will... have to talk to Shampoo about it.”

“You know, it would give people a better impression of you if you used *watashi* instead of your name, Shui,” Ukyo said.

“*Watashi* is too formal,” Hibari replied. “It’s much more fun to use *boku*.”

“*Boku* is kinda immature. It’s cute you usin’ it Hibari, but for a boy it’s barely any better than using his name. *Ore* is much more mature and manly,” Ranma countered.

“I still say that with Shui being foreign *watashi* makes the most sense,” Ukyo mumbled.

“*This is why Shui doesn’t use any. It is all so complicated...*”

* * *

Ranma pulled Shui aside in the changeroom after Ukyo had hurried out (as she usually did). Shui was confused, but stayed quiet on Ranma’s prompting until the change room was empty.
“Listen, Shui. I need a favour. I know Hibari and Ukyo both say they’re not plannin’ to do anything on this date, but... well they were basically a couple in middle school. An’... I still haven’t actually taken Hibari on a proper date yet, so I worry Ukyo might manage to sweep her off her feet. Or worse decide to use Hibari to try to get to me somehow. So I wanna keep an eye on ‘em.”

Shui nodded. “How does Shui help?”

“Well, they’re goin’ to a kinda fancy restaurant. I’d look weird if I went alone. So I’ll need you to come along too. We’ll pretend to be boyfriend and girlfriend if anyone asks. How’s that sound?”

“Boyfriend and girlfriend,” Shui mumbled. The first image to form in the Chinese teen’s head had the roles reversed from Ranma’s plan. Then, Hibari’s comments from earlier meant the image of two girlfriends together flitted through Shui’s head until finally the true set up was properly realised. “Yes. Should be able to do that.”

“Nice. Their date is at 6:30. I’ve got a reservation for 6:15. It’s at the **Il Toro** Italian restaurant. Do you know anything about Italian food?”

“Not really, no.”

“Yeah... me neither. Should be interestin’,” Ranma said as they headed out of the change room.

“We are just spying no? Or are we eating too?” Shui asked.

“Well, it’s kinda rude to make a reservation and then not buy anythin’. Plus I don’t think I could sit in a restaurant and not eat.”

* * *

Hibari found it odd how Ranma rushed through his homework during their study session. She was the girl with the date, yet he seemed to have far more on his mind.

“I’m not going to let Ukyo try anything. Don’t worry,” Hibari said in her most reassuring voice.

Ranma nodded absently. “It’s not that. I’ve made plans with Shui to keep me from worryin’. I should actually head off soon.”

“Oh. Okay,” Hibari replied, pouting a bit. She’d hoped Ranma was going to try to follow her to keep an eye on her ‘date’. “You’re not going to let Shui try anything, are you?”

“What!” Ranma blurted.

“I think he has a crush on you,” Hibari said calmly. “Also if you’re off with him I’m not sure if Shampoo will be far away. She might cause trouble for you. Apparently she threatened Ukyo already.”

“Really? Why did she do that?”

“Something about us being a boxed set? So she didn’t like Ukyo trying to split us up. It would be cute and romantic if she hadn’t included death threats,” Hibari explained.

“Why didn’t Ucchan tell me?” Ranma asked, half to himself.

“She just used it as a warning in case Shampoo showed up during the date. I can only guess if she manages to drag you onto one she’ll give you the same warning.”
Ranma accepted that before excusing himself. Hibari sighed a bit before heading over to dig out a sporty lilac dress with a low back (to make up for the high front). As she went over to pull out some make up her eyes once more landed on the packet of Nyannichuan powder she kept stored away. As happened whenever she saw it she was tempted to use the packet now, but knew to save it until it was needed. At least until the Jusenkyo salesman was back in town and she could buy more (she was saving up quite a bit of cash for that). Instead she focused on applying bold light blue eyeshadow and lilac lipstick.

With her makeup ready Hibari hurried off to wait in the kitchen for Ukyo to call. Tsugumi was happily working away on dinner for the rest of the family. Suddenly Hibari realised she had a chance to talk things over with her eldest sister.

“Tsugumi, I don’t want to distract you from dinner, but there is something I’d like to talk about quickly.”

“Oh? Give me a moment,” the eldest Oozora daughter replied, turning the heat down on the stove so she could give it a bit less attention. “What did you need, little brother?”

“Well, that’s the thing. What will it take for you to accept that I’m a girl? You all can accept that Ranma’s a boy whatever form he’s in, but only Suzume has extended the idea to see me as a girl,” Hibari said, a bit of sadness in her voice. There would be no crying though. She was too proud of her mascara job today to risk that.

“Well,” Tsugumi began, but found herself at a loss for reasons. “I... Ranma is... I suppose there isn’t really a reason now that I think about it. Mostly force of habit... And I never realised you really wanted that? I always thought you were just having fun with everyone. Like that Tsubasa boy.”

“No. It’s what I’ve wanted for... well for as long as I’ve understood what the differences between boys and girls are supposed to be,” Hibari replied quietly.

“Very well. I don’t wish to start any fights with father, but I will try to call you sister whenever he is not around. Is that alright?”

It wasn’t quite the total victory Hibari had hoped for, but it had also gone far easier than she’d expected. “Sounds good for now. Thank you big sis.”

Further conversation was interrupted by the noise of Ukyo arriving to meet Hibari. Hurrying to the front door Hibari say Ukyo looking handsome in a dark green tie, white button up shirt, and black pants that were probably just from her school uniform. Ibari was there to see them off and was clearly struggling to support the pair’s choice of outfits judging by the amount of sweat on him.

“Well well, good work Ukyo-kun. You look quite handsome,” Hibari said with a wink.

“I was going to wear a jacket too, but it seems a little too warm for that,” Ukyo explained, apparently feeling underdressed.

“A perfectly sensible thought process,” Hibari replied. “Well, let’s get going. I’m craving mozzarella.”

“You two enjoy your night out. Haha! Hopefully you can rekindle the love you once felt,” Ibari told them both, stiffly giving Ukyo a slap on the back. His voice was tilted and rang false.

Hibari couldn’t help smirking and blew her father a kiss as she and Ukyo left. She giggled as he finally tipped over clutching his chest.
Shui fussed with the indigo tie currently around ‘his’ neck. Ranma was ten minutes late and the cursed Joketsuzoku teen was beginning to worry that plans had changed. As a distraction Shui went through the menu once again, trying to understand these Italian terms explained in Japanese. Sadly none of the waitstaff spoke Mandarin. Or English. Or Russian. The three languages Shampoo had chosen to study as a child due to their seemingly being the most useful should she ever travel were left so wasted in suburban Tokyo.

“Hey, sorry I’m late,” Ranma said quietly, sliding into the booth chair across from Shui. “It was hard to find somewhere to change on the way over.”

“Do not worry. It is fine,” Shui replied while taking in Ranma’s outfit. It was a surprisingly modest affair of a white blouse and red a line skirt. A moment’s reflection caused Shui to realise Ranma was definitely wearing a bra of some sort, which brought a blush to Shui’s face for a moment.

“So, have Ukyo and Hibari shown up yet?” Ranma asked while pulling out a large pair of glasses to put on.

“No, I have not seen them. They are not due for five minutes.”

“Huh,” Ranma said as he pulled his hair out of its braid to put it in a high ponytail. “You decided to go with *watashi*?”

“Consulted Japanese learning books that I share with Shampoo. It seemed like best choice. Question though... was I meant to wear disguise too?”

“Oh... Yeah! You probably shoulda... I was too busy worryin’ about my own. Oops. Well, they should be sitting behind you, so we don’t have to worry much. It’s not like black hair is a distinctive trait.”

“True,” Shui replied, absentmindedly fussing with one of those dark strands which showed only the slightest hint of Shampoo’s natural blue.

Ranma felt briefly transfixed by Shui’s body language, the redhead once again confused about finding Shui’s behaviour cute more and more frequently. The petite martial artist switched awkwardly to reading the menu, not wanting to worry about just what his sexuality might be tonight. It was so confusing. Ukyo was born a girl, but acted and looked like a boy, and Ranma found her handsome. Hibari was Ukyo’s reverse. Yet both said they were really girls. Ranma couldn’t tell what that meant for his own sexuality... he didn’t need to think about Shui and Ryoga too.

“Ranma? You stare at same page of menu for three minutes,” Shui said, breaking the redhead out of his self reflection.

“Sorry,” Ranma mumbled as he looked the restaurant over again. Ukyo and Hibari had arrived while he zoned out. “They’re here! Quick... look nonchalant.”

Shui had no idea what chalant looked like and less idea what nonchalant meant. But the way Ranma hid behind the menu to peak over at Hibari and Ukyo Shui got the gyst.

Across the restaurant Hibari and Ukyo both noticed the redhead trying to seem stealthy while staring at them.

“So he did decide to spy,” Ukyo said, mostly to herself, as she casually opened up her menu. “Going
to be a boring night for him."

"Wait a second. He’s with someone... that’s got to be Shui. He’s on a fake date with Shui? We just discussed how that boy has a huge crush on him."

"I don’t think you have to worry. It’s not like Ranma would actually let someone as masculine as Shui make advances," Ukyo replied calmly.

"You didn’t see him around Ryoga," Hibari replied simply. "And if you think you’ve got a chance of winning him you’d better hope Ranma’s open to having a boyfriend."

"Those in glass houses should be careful with stones. Let’s both agree not to question the other’s femininity," Ukyo countered.

Hibari found herself pouting and went back to trying to decide between lasagna and cannelloni. Out of the corner of her eye she saw a waiter approach Ranma and Shui’s table.

"Sir, madame, have you decided upon your orders?" the waiter asked nervously. That redhead was stunning, but her muscular and handsome boyfriend showed how out of his league she was.

"Uhh..." Ranma muttered as he flipped through the menu with panic.

"I will have mushroom risotto," Shui replied. (It was rice. Surely even if an exotic cuisine like Italian could only do rice so differently.)

"Fondue?" Ranma said, having effectively panicked and chose the first thing that his eyes landed on.

"Are... are you sure you can handle that, ma’am?" the waiter asked.

Suddenly Ranma’s competitiveness flared up. "Of course. I can handle any food."

"Very well," the waiter replied as he took their menus and walked off.

The small redhead suddenly realised he had nothing to stealthily hide behind while watching Hibari and Ukyo. He decided to hope they’d be too distracted to pay him any attention. He noted that they were currently reading over their menus (and missed the way Shui was staring at his cute round face happily).

"I think I’ll try a pizza," Ukyo said in an attempt to make conversation. "I’ve heard it be compared to okonomiyaki, so I should stick with something I know."

"We should give him a show," Hibari replied. "Let’s make Ranma think we’re having a great date. Since he trusts us so little... only fair we play with him a bit."

Ukyo looked up to ask what Hibari was talking about and found the other girl staring at her with loving eyes. Hibari’s eyelashes were batting away innocently, but there was just a tiny smirk to her lips that showed how in control she felt. Ukyo blushed and found her response die in her throat. "Y-you’re too good at that."

"Well obviously," Hibari replied simply while still giving the body language of someone in love. "I mastered how to have feminine charm in my behaviour to make up for how my body wasn’t planning to put in its fair share."

"You’re understating how pretty you are," Ukyo replied, nervously blushing. The chef let out a sigh of relief as their waitress appeared to offer a reprieve from Hibari’s playful flirting.
Ukyo ordered a pescatore pizza while Hibari chose the cheese cannelloni. While they waited for the order to return Ukyo tried to make small talk, and found Hibari laughing and smiling away as if Ukyo were the most suave dating partner imaginable. Ukyo gave the occasional brief glance over to Ranma’s table and found the redhead growing ever more red in the face as the night went on. By the time the food arrived Ukyo found herself joining in on the act completely. Even if they were both discussing their homework assignments they made sure to make eyes at one another and laugh away like they were flirting. Participating in the ruse helped it feel so much more natural for Ukyo.

Ukyo and Hibari also both had to honestly laugh whenever they looked over to see Ranma trying to grumpily eat a fondue. The stringy melted cheese frequently took the redhead’s full attention as he struggled to manage it. The two girls burst into laughter as they saw Shui try to sample a little and get shooed away. The petite cursed boy might not know how to eat his meal, but it was still his meal and Saotomes were not fond of sharing.

As Ukyo and Hibari laughed about a story from Ukyo’s third year of middle school the waitress appeared and placed a sheet of paper in front of Ukyo. Looking down the okonomiyaki chef was frightened by the bill’s price of nearly 5000 yen.

“Heh... that’s going to take a bite out of my finances,” Ukyo said, sighing a bit.

“Not at all,” Hibari replied before turning to the waitress. “The bill is going on the Oozora family tab please.”

“Oh! Very sorry, miss,” the waitress replied with a bow.

Ukyo lit up with smile. Saving money was always good news in her book.

Across the restaurant the bill placed in front of Shui had a bit of a different response.

“It is one bill?” Shui asked, looking over nervously at Ranma. Close to 4000 yen was a bit more of an investment than expected.

Ranma, grumpy from watching Ukyo and Hibari apparently flirt the whole night and struggling with dinner, glared at Shui. “Well duh. You’re supposed to be my boyfriend aren’t you? So you’re supposed to pay.”

“Oh. Oh yes,” Shui replied a bit reluctantly before smiling a bit. If they were keeping up appearances... then Shui might just get something kiss out of this date. Maybe? Hand holding at least, surely. “Is good thing Cologne give decent pay for work at restaurant. Have money to treat Ranma.”

When Shui returned from paying Shui found Ranma pacing impatiently by the front door.

“They left already. For some reason they didn’t have ta pay... We’ve got to hurry ta track them down,” the redhead said in a mix of a whisper and a hiss.

Ranma grabbed Shui’s hand and the pair were soon bounding across rooftops to reach the Oozora compound before Hibari and Ukyo’s more sedate pace. The two spies found hiding place in the shadows of a nearby alley as the pair they were pursuing walked into view. Hibari and Ukyo had linked arms (unbeknownst to Ranma Hibari had tried to rest her head on Ukyo’s shoulder while they walked, but found it tricky what with her actually being slightly taller than Ukyo).

Hibari glanced around as they reached the door. She couldn’t see Ranma anywhere, but felt herself being watched. Leaning towards Ukyo’s ear she whispered, “He’s definitely watching us. I’m not sure where, but... let’s give him what he’s waiting to see.”
“What do you mean?” Ukyo asked, whispering as well.

“A fake kiss. It’ll drive him crazy. He’s probably in that alley... Sabu always said it was the best place to watch the front gave from. So follow my lead,” Hibari explained in hushed whispers.


“Fine... I’ll do it then,” Hibari replied.

Before Ukyo could reply Hibari had placed her hands on the slightly shorter girl’s cheeks and leaned in to near kissing distance. Rather than kissing her Hibari just winked.

Only a moment after Hibari leaned in a shout from the alley behind Ukyo caused her to spin around in shock. Ranma came barreling out of the shadows, a panicked Shui hurrying after the redhead.

“Y-you two! You said I had nothing to worry about! And then you flirt the whole night before kissing! Gah!” the petite teen fumed.

“Oh. Ranma. I did not realise you were there,” Hibari replied with maximum sarcasm.

“Fine! Fine! If you’re going to kiss Ukyo then I’ll... I’ll...” Ranma looked around frantically, trying to think up some form of revenge. Then he saw Shui.

Before he even stopped to think about what he was doing Ranma grabbed the taller teen by the collar and pulled Shui down into a kiss. Ukyo and Hibari were floored by shock while Shui froze in a confused mix of fear and bliss.

“Hah!” Ranma proclaimed, pulling away from the confused Chinese teen after only a momentary kiss. (Were there tears in Ranma’s eyes?) “See, Hibari? I can kiss someone else too! How does that feel?”

“R-Ranma,” Hibari said as she stood back up. “Ukyo and I didn’t actually kiss. Or flirt. We were just putting on a show because we saw you watching us all evening. We were teasing you because you didn’t trust us.”

Ranma paled at the revelation. “Y-you didn’t actually kiss? Ya just.... Ooops.”

“Also, Ranma, you just kissed Shui pretty easily compared to how you were with me,” Hibari added, trying to swallow feelings of worry. “Do you... do you prefer the idea of having a boyfriend?”

“What!? No! No! No... I was just panickin’ and angry. Thinkin’ you were droppin’ me for Ucchan,” Ranma said.

Shui still seemed too lost in joy to process what was being said.

The sound of spring steel colliding with Ranma’s thick skull proved that Ukyo was no longer quite so stunned.

The spatula wielding girl hissed, not bothering to fight back her tears: “What’s with only being upset with Hibari? Ain’t I your fiancée too?”

“Hey!” Shui shouted, coming out of the daze. “Do not hit ai-er, tongzhi Ranma!”

“Oi! Stay out of this pal! You ain’t engaged to him. This is a fiancées only fight,” Ukyo shot back, glaring up at Shui.
Shui seemed almost ready to argue that point before backing down. “Fine. Shui leave then.”

The cute redhead rubbed his head where Ukyo spatula had hit him and stared at the ground. “Sorry Ucchan... I just... I kinda feel more like you’re competin’ for Hibari rather than me. We were just kids when we knew each other, but you and her were old enough to actually understand romance and stuff.”

“It was a crush. The most I’ve ever managed after you left me was crushes, Ranchan,” Ukyo said softly. “You’re the only one I ever actually loved. All those years... I wanted to tell myself I hated you, but I knew better.”

Ranma winced as the small redhead realised how much he’d hurt Ukyo, but what could he do? He loved Hibari, not Ukyo. Yet seeing his childhood friend looking at him with a mixture of tattered hope and sorrow left the genderbent teen with the need to do something to comfort her. As he tried to find some way out of the crisis the sharp shout of Shampoo caused the group to scatter a bit.

Shampoo landed in the middle on them with a crash as her chui landed where Ukyo had just been standing. Shampoo stood back up to her full height and pointed one of her colourful clubs at Ukyo. “You. Spatula boy,” she said the last word with such hatred it was clear to all it was meant as an insult, “you hurt both airen. Try to steal one from other. Shampoo warn you.”

“I tried to steal one? What about your roommate Shui? He managed to get a kiss out of Ranma!” Ukyo shot back, furious to have the way Ranma had been looking at her with such a soft expression ruined.

Shampoo’s eye twitched. “Shampoo... Shampoo punish Shui later.”

Ranma rushed between the two girls staring one another down and turned to Shampoo with his (currently rather short) arms spread to block her from attacking Ukyo. “Don’t you dare hurt my friend.”

Shampoo stared at Ranma with hurt confusion in her eyes. “B-but... chef girl hurt airen Ranma first. Shampoo just want defend both her airen. And defend love both airen have for other.”

“I... gah! I can’t deal with all this,” Ranma said, pinching the bridge of his nose. “How about we call a ceasefire? At least for tonight?”

Ukyo and Shampoo both harrumphed while staring daggers at the other, but begrudgingly agreed before departing their separate ways. As soon as they’d left Ranma let out a sigh and slide down to a seat beside the external wall of the Oozora compound.

“Why is my life such a mess?” the curvy cutie asked to the warm evening air.

Hibari sat down beside the redhead and took his hand. “Hey, it’s not just your life. I’ve been dragged into this chaos too. Let’s try to manage this together, okay?”

Ranma squeezed her hand back. “I want to, but... I felt so guilty hurting Ucchan like that. What am I supposed to do?”

“I’m flattered that you think otherwise, but I don’t have all the answers,” Hibari replied.

“I do wish you hadn’t messed around with me so much tonight,” the redhead said softly.

“And I wish you’d trusted me enough not to spy,” Hibari told him.
Memories and Broken Hearts

Chapter Notes

Author’s Note: This chapter gets kind of realistically depressing with covering some of Hibari’s treatment by her family. So... fair warning for anyone who’s had to struggle with similar issues themselves. It hits that point just after the Rie scene.

The room was dark, the sun having set long ago leaving the only glow of a nearby street light to illuminate the room. Shampoo’s figure curled up in the corner was easy to miss. As were the gentle sobs coming from her form.

Ranma had just kissed her and should be happy... yet he hadn’t kissed her. He’d kissed ‘Shui’ and so it felt wrong, like everything did when she took on cursed form. Living that lie she’d built up. Because that was what both the boys she loved wanted. They couldn’t want a girl like her.

Or at least that was what great grandmother had told her. That she had to become what she was now to win them. There had been no honourable path left. She could fail to gain her husbands and be left an outcast or subject herself to a curse that would probably make even Mousse reject her... to lower herself effectively to male status when she returned home.

Rising from her hidden corner Shampoo moved towards a more dignified seat upon her bed, feeling a need to physically pull herself out of her sobbing in order to think.

Hibari had asked about Shampoo falling for the feminine charms of the boys she was meant to marry. Ranma certainly had the physical side in spades and Hibari was remarkably pretty in either form. Yet Hibari wasn’t just pretty. Hibari lived as a girl. Maybe great grandmother was wr- no, it was no use to doubt her clan elder. Cologne knew so much better than Shampoo. 300 years of experience was not to be questioned.

But maybe ‘Shui’ could be a little more genuine. If that face wasn’t such a lie then... then maybe she could accept being loved that way.

First though, Ukyo was right. She was angry at ‘Shui’ for stealing a kiss from Ranma. Reaching over she grabbed a glass of water and poured it on her head. Looking at this face, it had so much of her in it still and that only made her more uncomfortable. Steeling her resolve she balled her hand in a fist.

Shui punched herself in the face.

* * *

Ukyo was switching over to her school shoes when she caught sight of Shui walking over. She was about to give him a friendly hello when she noticed his rather nasty black eye.

“Oof, nasty shiner there, Shui.”

The taller Chinese teen just glared at her while switching shoes.

“Listen,” Ukyo said in the least aggressive tone she could manage, “Shui, I’m sorry for last night. I didn’t mean to lose my temper on you, but... well, you managed to get a kiss from Ranma... and I
still haven’t. I was more than a little jealous.”

“Understand,” Shui replied sharply before marching off to class.

Ukyo punched her shoe locker, bending the thin metal door slightly. ‘Stupid. Stupid. Stupid. Honestly Ukyo, You always get angry and try to paper over it later.’

She continued to mentally berate herself as she walked up to class. Entering the classroom proper she was greeted by the sight of Hibari and Ranma both fussing over Shui. The latter was also apologising furiously about something. No doubt the kiss.

Reluctantly walking forward she could make out that Ranma was blaming the move on female hormones. Not the most dignified route in Ukyo’s opinion. (And it wasn’t like female hormones had ever caused Ukyo to kiss a boy...)

“Is okay Ranma. I can only imagine how confusing for you this is,” Shui replied with a gentle smile. And a batting of eyelashes? Ukyo was pretty sure that was new.

Ranma blushing was also new. Ukyo saw Hibari notice that as well and scowl briefly.

“I have a bit of good news while we figure out the terms of our peace treaty,” Hibari announced, nudging herself unsubtly between Ranma and Shui. “The Boxing club are off training this week, so at least we don’t have to worry about Shiina trying to get involved.”

* * *

“For the hundredth time... Akane and I aren’t an item,” Kousaku groaned as Hiroshi and Daisuke bugged him once more over lunch.

“Come on, you’ve lived at the Tendos’ for over a month and she hasn’t killed you yet,” Hiroshi said.

“For Akane that’s tantamount to a declaration of undying love,” Daisuke added.

Kousaku glanced nervously across the room at Akane. She was beautiful, but scared him a bit. She could break his arm without trying if he did anything to upset her. “It’ll never happen...”

“Maybe you should try an easier target then, Romeo... I heard a rumour Sayuri’s looking for a boyfriend,” Daisuke offered.

Kousaku felt a strange shiver at the idea of dating Sayuri he didn’t quite understand. It was probably because Akane was so close to Sayuri and so the move was nearly as risky as trying to date Akane herself.

“What about you two?” Kousaku asked. “You keep bugging me about my love life, but neither of you seem to be much better with girls.”

Daisuke and Hiroshi exchanged awkward glances before Hiroshi gave a shrug to Kousaku. “We’re proud bachelors. You’re clearly the romantic type.”

* * *

Ranma and Shui came to a halt as they finished the warm up jog around the school for gym class. Ukyo was well ahead of the rest of the class, but with her bindings she couldn’t exert herself to her full potential, leaving her still far behind the pair. This left Shui and Ranma with a few moments alone. Usually they just made small talk about martial arts, but Ranma could sense things were going
to go a bit differently today.

Shui slid in and grabbed Ranma’s hand before the pigtailed boy realised what was happening.

“It was very nice kiss,” Shui said, red eyes managing to look warm as they gazed at Ranma. “If tongzhi ever want do that again I would be most happy.”

Ranma found himself at a loss for words as his heart started to race. There was genuine love in Shui’s eyes and Ranma had no idea what to do. Eyes racing about as if he could find an answer sitting on the school grounds somewhere, Ranma realised the girl’s gym class wasn’t too far away. And Hibari was glaring daggers at him.

“I-I’ve got Hibari,” Ranma replied, having found resolve in the fear of upsetting his cute blonde fiancée.

“Well yes. I want kiss tongzhi Hibari too,” Shui answered softly. “Both Hibari and Ranma are wonderful.”

Ranma found himself confused and once more Shui caught him by surprise by grabbing his gym t-shirt just below the collar and pulling Ranma into kissing range.

“Oy!” Ukyo shouted as she finally caught up to them. “I doubt the teacher will be too happy with two boys kissing during class.”

Ranma and Shui both blushed. On some level both of them had managed to forget their current sex: Ranma due to his memory of having kissed while female; Shui meanwhile so focused on Ranma as to forget everything else for the moment.

* * *

Hibari hurried along the fence after Ranma as well as she could. She’d always thought her sense of balance was pretty good, yet she still needed to concentrate to get anywhere close to the speed the handsome boy in front of her was moving. Yet Ranma found time to run backwards periodically in order to check her form.

The blonde was starting to feel out of breath when Ranma came to a stop.

“Not bad. Still got a bit ta catch up ta my sense of balance, but I’d say you’ve got pops beat,” Ranma said as she caught up to him.

“Is that really an impressive feat?” Hibari asked. She’d honestly never seen Genma do much in the way of balancing.

Ranma looked offended for a moment before answering. “He’s kinda lazy, yeah... but that’s ‘cause he’s good enough ta be lazy. Trained me after all, that’s gotta prove he’s pretty good.”

Hibari shrugged. “Fair.”

Ranma hopped down to the street below and turned around to watch Hibari. A mischievous smile grew on her face and she leapt towards him with no effort made to land on her feet so he’d have to catch her. She landed into his arms and wrapped her own around his neck.

“My noble prince,” Hibari whispered before reaching up to quickly kiss him.

The peck was so brief Ranma was still getting his own lips into a proper kiss by the time Hibari had
pulled away. She couldn’t help but smirk at the look of longing on his face.

“I do think you owe me a little explanation,” Hibari said as she hopped out of Ranma’s arms, but placed a hand on his shoulder so as not to break contact too much.

“What about?” Ranma asked, shivering slightly as Hibari ran a finger down his cheek.

“You were blushing when Shui was flirting today. You also weren’t resisting much.”

“I was too surprised ta respond!” Ranma replied.

Hibari began walking away in the direction of the Oozora home, shaking her head slightly. “Ranma, you kissed him. In female form... though I’m actually not totally certain if that matters to him. But either way, you knew he had a crush on you before. Now he’s convinced he’s got a real shot.”

Hibari reached a crosswalk and stopped to turn around and look at the boy following after her. “H-he doesn’t though... right?”

Ranma hurried forward and grabbed Hibari’s hand. “I’m not going ta leave you.”

Hibari held onto Ranma’s hand as the pair walked through quiet residential streets in silence. Ranma knew he didn’t have the best skills when it came to reassuring someone, so he hoped that Hibari would bring up a different topic.

“Shui doesn’t need you to though, does he?” Hibari asked suddenly.

“Need me ta what?” Ranma said, thoroughly confused.

“Leave me. There’s something in the water over at the Neko Hanten, I swear... I’ve seen how he looks at me too. I’m rather better at detecting these things than you,” Hibari said with a bit of a laugh.

“So, what do we do? He’s our friend so I don’t wanna be mean... I don’t really know how to handle this,” Ranma replied nervously.

Hibari was about to reply that they’d let Shui down gently somehow, but then a thought occurred to her. She had picked up a lot of signs that Ranma might not be staying a guy and, while she knew she’d continue to love Ranma either way, she would miss having a handsome hunk around. Shui was definitely a hunk. They also both got along well with Shui.

And surely adding a third person to their already half forbidden love would render it even more defiant of society’s demands?

“They say you never know unless you try... who knows maybe Shui can manage to win us both over?” Hibari said.

“R-really? Ya think it’s worth tryin’?” Ranma replied, absolutely stunned.

“Having two handsome boys at my beck and call sounds pretty good,” Hibari said and stuck her tongue out with a wink.

* * *

The day had been rather hot, summer starting to reach its peak. Ukyo had been sweating the whole day and was not looking forward to having to work over her grill today. Especially not with how sweaty her sarashi got. But she had to be open if she wanted to afford her rent.
“Hey, Shui,” Hibari said happily. There was also a brief ‘yo’ from Ranma.

Ukyo decided to peek around the shoe lockers to see what her friends and fiancé were up to.

“Oh! Tongzhi! What can Sh-I do for you?” Shui asked, displaying more of that almost bubbly demeanor Shui had been showing ever since the kiss with Ranma. It had struck Ukyo as almost feminine.

“When ya asked us both on a date before you really meant a romantic date, didn’t ya?” Ranma asked.

Shui paled slightly, red eyes flitting back and forth between Hibari and Ranma trying to read their expressions. Where they hostile? Shui still wasn’t totally certain about the average Japanese views on polyamory. (And even less certain what Hibari and Ranma’s opinions might be.)

“Y-yes?” Shui offered weakly, all bubbliness having firmly vanished.

“And then Mousse went and interrupted,” Hibari replied, shaking her head a bit. “How about we try again this Sunday? Just as a trial, but we’ll give it a shot since you’re not trying to break us apart... unlike some people.”

Hibari’s head turned slightly, clearly indicating she knew Ukyo was there. The chef slipped back to her side of the lockers to avoid being seen.

“I would love that,” Shui replied, jumping right back into maximum bubbliness.

Ukyo couldn’t see it, but she could still tell Shui was hugging both of them. Her mood had just nosedived... and there was no way she could produce meals up to her standards when she was this upset. Luckily she knew where she could find a free punching bag right now and stormed off towards the boxing club’s training room.

It was almost eerie to find the place so dead, but it suited her purposes. Storming over to the heavier punching bag a little further from the door she began a barrage of angry blows.

Why did Ranchan like two feminine boys better than her? *Wham-wham* How was she supposed to fix this? *Wham-wham* Acting more feminine? *Wham-wham* Or more masculine? *Wham-wham* Ranchan hadn’t even come to the restaurant yet. *Wham-wham* Th-that jerk! *WHAM!* The last punch sent the bag swinging wildly and Ukyo had to dodge its return. Panting a bit she knew she was still angry, but was starting to feel a bit better. She prepared to open another barrage when the sounds of a girl sobbing in the hallway reached her ears. Ukyo felt a moment of internal conflict as she wonder if she should go to help. The decision was made for her when the door to the training hall opened and a girl with long dark blue hair stomped in, tears running down her face.

Rie marched over to the ring and slammed her keys down onto the canvas. She then turned around and started to march back out, when she stopped halfway to the door. Pausing only a moment she turned and headed over to the second, lighter, punching bag.

Ukyo was impressed and surprised by Rie’s form as she unleashed a flurry of jabs. The tears began flowing once more and after a moment Rie stopped punching to collapse on her knees.

“Shiina... th-that jerk. Why does h-he have to love her?” she muttered between the sobs.

Ukyo felt a sudden bond and walked over to the bluenette, kneeling beside her. “H-hey, it’s going to be okay,” she said softly.
Rie’s legs tried to jump, but with her kneeling position she only managed to tumble away from Ukyo slightly. Ukyo was confused as the other girl seemed to take a moment to find her. There was also no spark of recognition on her face, which surprised Ukyo as she’d figured the grudge match she’d had with Ranma would have been pretty memorable.

“It’s Kuonji,” Ukyo said. “Kuonji Ukyo. We’ve met once or twice.”

“Oh! Oh yes. I thought I recognised you voice. It was very memorable for some reason... I’m sorry... I don’t have my contacts in right now so I can’t really see mu-well, at all to be honest.”

“You have contacts?” Ukyo asked as she offered the other girl a hand up. (It took Rie a moment to notice Ukyo’s hand.)

“Yeah, I’ve got about the heaviest prescription you can get. Heh, I had to wear total cokebottle glasses as a kid... I-I’m not actually sure why I shared that,” Rie said, clearly growing a bit flustered.

“Girls tend to find me comfortable to be around,” Ukyo replied with a cocky boyish grin she quickly realised Rie had no idea she was making. “Do you have your contacts around?”

“Oh yes. They’re in my locker. It just... it isn’t good to wear them when having a major sob session like I was having,” Rie said. “Why do you ask?”

“I know a good cure for a broken heart, sugar, but I don’t want you to get lost on the way.”

* * *

Rie dug away at the delicious okonomiyaki before her while Ukyo happily served some other customers. Somehow the chef found time to return and chat with her, the happy mask she wore dropping only slightly.

“So tell me, luv, who was it that broke your heart? I’ll give him a good piece of my mind,” Ukyo said quietly, so that the other customers wouldn’t hear.

Rie sighed. “Shiina... I don’t understand it. She’s rejected him so many times, but... for whatever reason he’s still in love with Hibari.”

Ukyo’s eye twitched. “H-Hibari... quite the vixen that... girl.”

“Oh! That’s right... you’re after Ranma. I-I still don’t quite follow how you two are engaged when you’re both boys,” Rie said, seeming to grow a bit lost in thought as she tried to work out specifics in her head.

“Heh, it’s complicated. But he’s a girl half the time now, s-so that makes it easier,” Ukyo replied awkwardly.

“Ah. You call him he still... you like him as a boy don’t you?” Rie asked, her voice dropping to a conspiratorial whisper.

“I-I... uh,” Ukyo muttered, having no good defense.

“I won’t judge. I can understand what there is to see in boys more easily than girls after all,” Rie replied softly.

Ukyo was still trying to find a better defense when the room began to shake. She knew in an instant it was an earthquake and rushed to turn the gas off on her grill.
When the shaking stopped Ranma let out a sigh of relief at how little damage there’d been. A few closets had popped open and a vase or two had fallen over, but it didn’t seem like anywhere near bad enough of an earthquake to cause real property damage.

Glancing around the room he saw: Suzume taking shelter as Seiji’s feet, Tsugumi having produced a wok from somewhere to shield herself, Tsubame half under the chabudai table, his pops sitting in the middle of the nearby koi pond as a panda, and Ibari clinging to a pillar in the exterior hallway.

Then of course there was Hibari grasping hold tightly onto his own torso as they sat splayed on the floor. Ranma braced himself for chiding from either of the fathers, but had no interest in breaking her grip on him.

“Oof, quite the mess,” Tsugumi said as she looked over the various odds and ends that had fallen out of storage. “Time to get cleaning.”

Pouting slightly Hibari let go of Ranma and both teens went to help Tsugumi with cleaning. Suzume also hurried over to lend a hand, though she spent more time being distracted by various odds and ends she found than actually cleaning. Still, she helped more than she hindered (and she was cute enough no one had the heart the shoo her away).

“Who’s that?” Suzume asked, pointing to a picture in the photo album she was currently flipping through.

As the two sisters looked down to see who Suzume was pointing at both girl’s faces suddenly darkened a bit. Ranma had only a moment to wonder why a photo of a lovely women who looked quite a bit like Tsugumi would sadden them so.

“That’s mother Suzume,” Tsugumi said softly.

“Oohh. I’ve only ever seen her dressed up fancy in her picture on the butsudan,” Suzume said.

“Ahh, I haven’t seen that album in years,” Ibari said as he walked back into the room with a panda following behind him. Ibari sat himself down at the chabudai. “I’d worried we’d lost it. Would be good to look through it again.”

“Yay!” Suzume cheered, running over with the album to sit in her father’s lap.

Ranma, Tsubame, and Hibari also gathered around to see. Tsugumi continued to clean, though by now there wasn’t much left. She remembered the album well enough.

“Who’s that guy?” Suzume asked when they turned to a photo which showed her mother and a handsome man in his mid twenties.

“Hoho, that’s me,” Ibari replied happily.

“You looked better without the mustache,” Hibari said.

Ibari grumbled, but continued to flip through the album. There were a couple pages of wedding photos. Then soon photos covering Tsugumi’s birth. A family holiday followed. Tsubame’s birth was next. A toddler Tsugumi sat holding a nearly new born Tsubame in one photo. A couple pages later revealed Hibari’s birth. Once more there was a picture of Tsugumi holding the newborn, the eldest Oozora daughter was now four or five by Ranma’s reckoning. She looked thrilled to have another sibling, though little Tsubame seemed a bit less joyful.
What really got Ranma’s attention though was all the pictures with signs reading ‘it’s a boy’ and Hibari wrapped in blue constantly. The next few pages were clearly dedicated to baby pictures of Hibari, far more than either of her sisters had received (though Tsugumi found her way into many of these photos having apparently already decided she wanted to look after her younger sibling). Glancing around the table Ranma was sure Tsubame looked bitter that Hibari was the subject of so many photos while the blonde herself was making faces at the boyish clothes she’d been made to wear.

As the photos and years went by Hibari continued to be dressed as a young boy, until they reached one photo from a summer festival. The three sisters were dressed in yukata, but from the patterns it was clear Tsubame’s was a boy’s yukata while Hibari wore a girl’s design. A second photo from the same night showed Hibari with her parents. Ibari was clearly uncomfortable with Hibari’s outfit, while her mother seemed perfectly happy.

“I should never have given in,” Tsubame muttered.

“I don’t blame you dear,” her father said. “You were still just a child and Hibari... was putting on quite the tantrum.”

The blonde just rolled her eyes.

Ranma was surprised to see that a couple pages later Hibari and Tsugumi were in a picture having what he could only guess was a tea party with various dolls around them. Hibari wore a dress much too large for her which had to have been Tsugumi’s. Ibari’s face scrunched up once more and he quickly turned the page.

Then they reached Suzume’s birth. Tsugumi once more made sure to pose holding her new youngest sibling and this time there were photos of the other two holding the newest Oozora too. They went through a few baby photos of Suzume when Ibari paused, apparently afraid to turn the page. Suddenly Hibari stood up.

“I’ve seen enough for today,” she said before storming off.

Tsubame’s eyes fell as well. “I have some homework to do.”

As Tsubame left as well the mustachioed father of the Oozora family took a deep breath and flipped the page. The whole family were clad in black. Except for one missing member. Ranma saw a lone tear running down Ibari’s face as he continued through the album. Suzume, who was barely a toddler in the photos, showed only a slight bit of sadness (more out of empathy than memory). Ranma understood that she must not have remembered her mother enough to mourn her.

What struck Ranma next was a few pages where young Hibari (who was now nearly the spitting image of present day Suzume) wore boy’s clothes, a broken smile, and dead eyes. Then a couple pages later the blond stopped appearing in the album. Ranma wondered why, until one page had a photo of the other three Oozora girls dressed in kimonos having a picnic under the cherry blossoms. Except there was a fourth child mostly cut out of the frame.

Ranma felt a bit sick at how the album continued with Hibari never photographed, but for a few times where what was almost certainly her elbow or leg. The best photo of her was one where she was barely visible as a reflection in the mirror.

Ranma stood up. “I should work on my own studies.”

He headed up to the second floor area, not with school on his mind but rather Hibari. Reaching her
room he was surprised and confused to find it empty. Worrying where she could have gone he felt relieved when the sound of music drifted down from the Oozoras’ rooftop patio.

Hurrying over to the outside staircase here heard Hibari’s emotional voice begin to sing while a guitar sound played.

«I tried to laugh about it, cover it all up with lies,» she sang out in English.

Ranma rushed up the stairs, not quite following the lyrics as he did so. English still wasn’t his strongest subject after all. Hibari stood on the patio with a guitar strapped over her shoulder as she was belting out the lyrics in the direction of the family room where her father no doubt was still sitting.

«Now I would do most anything; to get you back by my side, But I just kept on laughing, hiding the tears in my eyes. Because boys don't cry. Boys don't cry. Boys don't cry,» she sang as tears flowed down her cheeks.

Having reached the end of the song Hibari lifted one hand to her face and began to sob some more. Ranma hurred over and brought her into a soft hug (not certain how fragile her guitar might be).

“I-I tried you know. When mom died... dad said I had to be strong for my sisters and I did everything I could to be a perfect son... I never cried. I did everything I was told... and it was horrible,” she said between the sobs.

Ranma moved one of his hands up to her head and brushed her warm red hair with his fingers. He froze for a split second as he processed that and suddenly it made sense why it she had only just started to play despite having left so much sooner than he did. It must have taken a couple minutes to get the instant nyannichuan ready. He supposed she must have needed to get as far away as possible from whatever masculinity she had right now.

Hibari lifted her face so that her big blue eyes stared into his own. “Why can’t dad love me for who I am? A-and... why do I keep thinking he’ll come around someday?”

“I don’t know what else ya can do... everybody wants their parents to love ‘em,” Ranma said softly. He then leaned forward to kiss her on the forehead.

They stood there quietly for a few moments until Hibari pulled back a bit. The position with the bass guitar between wasn’t the most comfortable after all. Ranma’s eyes flitted down to the instrument as the moved apart.

“I didn’t know ya knew how ta play guitar too,” Ranma said.

“Bass, technically,” Hibari replied with a slight chuckle. “It was actually dad’s idea. He thought it was a manly instrument that it would be good for me to learn. Pfft... like that did anything.”

“Well it’s cool either way. I don’t know much a anythin’ about music. Playin’ an instrument always seemed like fun.”

Hibari looked down at her bass and smiled. She removed the strap from her shoulder and placed it over Ranma’s.

“Hey, what are ya doin’?”

“I’m going to give you a lesson. You’ve picked up my tutoring for school pretty quickly. I bet you could learn how to play an instrument easily too,” Hibari replied with a smile.
Seeing her face genuinely light up at the idea of having something else to teach him, even through her eyes were still red from tears, Ranma knew he wanted to cooperate. (Plus he did honestly think it seemed like fun to know how to play an instrument.)
Saturday afternoons were a bustling time around Wakaba. Especially at Ucchan’s, which had become one of the main hangouts for girls getting off school before they went off for an afternoon of Shopping. Why girls in particular? The very handsome cook of course. Ukyo was happy for the customers, but had heard rumours that some of the boys were worried about visiting lest they be teased that they too wanted their meal served by a handsome guy.

With Ranma and Hibari both getting so much open attention from the male populace of Wakaba High School it left the few tattered remains of Ukyo’s femininity feeling insulted. Of course what really hurt was the lost income from potential customers.

Ukyo was lost in thought on her way over to open up shop when a gentle voice called out to her. Turning to see the source she was a bit surprised to see Rie hurrying her way.

“Kuonji-kun,” Rie called out. “You walk really fast.”

“Ah, well yeah. The quicker I open the restaurant the quicker I can start serving customers,” the chef replied. “And please, luv, call me Ukyo.”

“Sorry Ukyo-kun,” Rie said with a slight bow. “I-I was wondering if I could ask your for help?”

“What sort of help?” Ukyo asked. Rie was sweet, and she felt a kinship with her, but they were still only acquaintances really.

“I... I...” Rie began, before bending into a deep bow. “I would like you to take me on as an assistant at your restaurant.”

Ukyo nearly stumbled in surprise, taking a moment to compose herself. “The path of an Okonomiyaki chef is difficult and takes dedication. You can’t just pick it up on a whim. I’ll need to know your heart it truly in it... What is it that’s driving you?”

“Well... this might sound silly, but it really matters to me,” Rie replied nervously as she stood back up. “After Shiina rejected me in favour of Hibari I knew I needed to prove my self worth, just to myself at least. I need to find a challenge of some sort to overcome. And thinking back to the artistry you put into your cooking... If I could become even a quarter as good as you it would prove I have worth. It would e-especially help knowing I can do something better than Hibari.”

Ukyo watched as tears started to form in the dark haired girls eyes, and felt her heart move at Rie’s motivation. To prove yourself after being rejected in love... that was truly the noblest of goals. Rie would also likely help bring in more male customers. Not only was she cute, but her figure was easily up there with Shampoo or Ranma.

“Very well. Meet me on Monday after school. You will have a trial period as a waitress,” Ukyo said.

“Monday? I could help today,” Rie replied nervously.

“Weekends are much too busy to take on a new assistant. Monday is slow enough I’ll be able to show you the ropes,” Ukyo explained.

“Oh! Yes, of course. I’m sorry.”

“Also, sugar, you don’t need to apologise so much.”
“S-sorry... I... oops.”

Ukyo laughed for a moment. “Calm down Rie-chan. You’re not on trial for a couple days. I’ll see
you Monday.”

Ukyo was smiling as she began to jog towards her restaurant. Some of her boy issues had likely just
been fixed. Of course her real boy issues with Ranma were going to take a lot more work.

* * *

The Oozora siblings and Ranma were gathered around the kitchen table, nibbling away on the
afternoon snack Tsugumi had prepared for them. The black haired boy was struggling to pace
himself, years of conditioning to expect his food snatched away made that hard, but he didn’t want to
be rude. And had started to grow self conscious about the judgemental stares of the Oozora family
when he ate at his normal pace.

Instead he tried his best to focus on the conversation as Suzume recounted her week. Apparently
she’d taken Katagiri out on a date only to have him ask about the ‘gorgeous redhead’ staying with
her. While Ranma struggled with awkward feelings over the boy being infatuated with a girl who
didn’t exist Suzume explained that her answer to the question was to slap him.

“Suzume-chan, that wasn’t very polite,” Tsugumi said.

“I said it was a date and I paid for his admission... he shouldn’t have brought up his other crush,” the
little blue haired girl countered with a pout.

“I agree with little sis,” Hibari replied. “Katagiri was out of line.”

“You two... such rambunctious girls,” Tsugumi muttered softly to herself.

Tsubame’s eye twitched. “Girls? Girls!? Don’t tell me he’s pulled you into his perversion too,
Tsugumi. He’s our brother.”

Hibari stuck her tongue out at Tsubame and lifted some of her still red hair. “If you think that’s
perverted you’ll really flip when you hear about who Ranma and I are dating tomorrow.”

The pigtailed boy shrank a bit, still a bit embarrassed he was actually going through with this. Hibari
was one thing, but a boy who actually looked and acted like one? Yet there was no denying he did
feel something in regards to Shui.

Tsubame meanwhile took a few moments to piece together what Hibari meant. “Wait... you’re going
on a date with two people? Th-that’s beyond perverted.”

Hibari rolled her eyes, but Ranma felt a need to defend their position.

“I-well, ya see... Shui thinks it could work. And he’s our friend. And-and,” Ranma began to fuss
with pressing his fingers together. “And maybe I kinda think he’s handsome. And so does Hibari.
So... so we’re just gonna give it a shot.”

“Oh, but that does remind me,” Hibari said, “Ranma, have you decided how you’re going on the
date?”

The pigtailed boy stared at the (still) red haired girl trying to read her face for clues as to what she
meant. “How... like we’re takin’ the train ain’t-Oh! Ya mean boy form or girl form... Well, Shui is
kinda touchy so... I figure there’s less hassle if I go in girl mode?”
Hibari gave a smile like she knew a secret. Tsubame meanwhile began to fume.

“Th-that’s... Gah! I don’t actually know if that’s better or worse than you going in boy form,” the brown haired Oozora sister sighed as bent over to rest her chin on the table. “I’m going to have a nervous breakdown I swear.’

“Just go with the flow, Tsubame. You’re the one making things harder than they need to be,” Hibari replied.

* * *

The date of the date had finally arrived. A pair of redheads stood under a tree as they watched the throngs of people go by on the way to their Sunday shopping destinations. Hibari was wearing a sky blue dress and white cardigan, while Ranma had chosen his orange shirt with red bowtie, accompanying it with green shorts borrowed from Hibari.

“These things barely cover my butt,” Ranma whispered while trying to pull the shorts down slightly (embarrassed by the number of boys checking out his legs). And trying to deal with the constant sensation he had of being watched.

“That’s the point, Ranma,” Hibari replied, pinching Ranma’s rear. “You’ve got a nice bottom. Might as well embrace that.”

“I know it’s nice. I just don’t really care about telegraphin’ that to every guy that walks by,” Ranma grumbled.

“I offered you a longer skirt,” Hibari said, giving a short shrug.

“I’m a guy... I ain’t wearin’ one if I’m not doin’ a disguise,” the adorable redhead replied, pouting.

Hibari rolled her eyes and chuckled a bit. She was about to tease Ranma further when Shui came into view.

The handsome Chinese teen was dressed in skinny jeans, doc martin boots, and an unbuttoned Mao jacket overtop of a Godzilla t-shirt.

“Well, that’s certainly a... look,” Hibari said as Shui practically bounced over towards them.

“Is fashionable, no?” Shui asked, posing a bit to show off the look. And specifically how tight those pants were in the rear.

Both Ranma and Hibari blushed a bit at the sight.

“I... we’ve got a train to catch don’t we?” a flustered curvy redhead declared, still baffled about his sexuality.

“Mhm, it’s a bit of a trip to Ikebukuro,” Hibari replied, grabbing both Ranma and Shui’s hands to lead them off towards the train.

* * *

Ranma sat awkwardly between Shui and Hibari on the train. Shui had made sure to rest an arm over Ranma’s shoulders, and Hibari was leaning so that her head was resting on Ranma’s while she held Shui’s arm.

It was almost too much human contact for Ranma, yet there was something invigorating about it.
Ranma could sense that Hibari was being protective of him. Letting Shui know that he was something of a guest here, and that she and Ranma were in charge of the date.

It then suddenly struck Ranma that this was his first proper date with Hibari... and he was in girl mode. The shorter redhead began to blush at the realisation.

* * *

Shui and Ranma both followed Hibari a bit apprehensively into the record store. Shui had never really shopped for music, and was overwhelmed by the sheer number of albums present. Ranma had flipped through Hibari’s record collection once or twice, and was beginning to grasp just how massive and varied the world of modern music was, but had another reason to feel nervous.

Hibari had a specific album in mind and had rushed off to find it while the other two hung back a bit.

“I really hope we don’t get a repeat of last time,” Ranma whispered to Shui.

“Last time?” Shui asked.

“Mhm. Shampoo smashed through a wall and chased us over half of Nerima,” Ranma muttered. The feeling they were being followed was something Ranma just couldn’t shake.

“Oh,” Shui replied. Internally adding: ‘I didn’t realise that was a record store. Then again I wasn’t paying much attention... I wish Ranma would say my real name without making that disgusted face.’

“Well, let’s go catch up with Hibari,” Ranma said, filling that silence that was left by Shui’s thought.

“Oh, right,” Shui nodded.

The pair caught up to Hibari, who was deep in the M’s of the alternative domestic music section. The currently red-haired girl was smiling and holding an album up.

“I’ve been looking for this thing for ages,” she said, beaming away.

“The Worst of Moonriders... Why would you want the worst?” Ranma asked.

“It’s a joke title,” Hibari replied, rolling her eyes. “And they’ve got Don’t Trust Over 30 for half off. I love this store.”

“They’ve got quite a lot of albums I recognise from your room,” Ranma said.

“Mhm, that’s why I brought you, Ranma. You can start your collection with all the best albums. They’ve got P-Model, Plastics, Moonriders, Yellow Magic Orchestra... all the best stuff. A good foreign selection too, like Culture Club, Japan, and the Cure.”

“Wait... how is Japan foreign?” Ranma asked, Shui also trying to process that.

“It’s the band name. They’re English,” Hibari explained.

The shorter redhead nodded and looked over some of the records in the Moonriders section, but came to a stop halfway.

“Ya know, it seems kinda silly for me ta buy the same records you’ve got in the room beside me,” Ranma said. “Not much point in having two copies in the same house is there? I mean, if we both wanna listen to the same album we can just open up the divider between our rooms.”
“I... You know, you’re right,” Hibari replied. “Well... I’d say I’ve got all the best albums domestic albums here already, but for foreign albums... I’ve only really got a couple of bands I follow there. Let me go track somebody down to set you up with some foreign stuff to sample.”

Hibari rushed off again, clearly in her element in this store. Ranma felt himself envying her. Sure, he was better in a fight, but she was no slouch. And she’d managed to have all these other interests and skills that he was just starting to realise were things. He couldn’t help but wonder how things might have turned out if he’d led a more normal childhood.

A line of thought that froze when the image of himself in current form wearing one of Hibari’s outfits popped in his head. The petite redhead shook his head, trying to dislodge the image, but found it replaced with his birth form now wearing the outfit. He was surprised how the idea of loose hair and a little makeup made the mental image still feel feminine.

“Tongzhi Ranma okay?” Shui asked, while picking up couple of Moonriders albums.

Ranma looked up at his handsome date and began to feel silly. Here he was, on a date with a boy. And a girl who was technically born a boy... or however he was supposed to word that. And he was in girl mode.

“Just thinkin’ about what a pervert I am,” Ranma muttered. There had to be a reason pops had talked about the importance of being a man... Ranma just had to remember what it was.

Ranma’s introspection was interrupted by Hibari hurrying over with twenty-something woman in tow behind her. “Maon-chan says she’ll hook you up with some foreign SP’s to listen to.”

“Hibari-chan assures me that you like her music collection, so I think I can offer a few musicians you might like, miss,” the kind looking brunette added.

Ranma grimaced a bit at being called ‘miss’, those feelings of guilt welling up once more, but followed the woman quietly.

“Now, I think a fairly safe start is some Bowie-san,” Maon explained, handing Ranma a pair of headphones.

The small redhead put the headphones on and the woman pressed play. Looking over Ranma saw the title on the single was Rebel Rebel. The sound of guitar and drumsticks hit Ranma quickly. Despite only half following the English lyrics Ranma’s head began bobbing up and down.

“I think she likes it,” Maon said with a smile while pausing the record. Once the small redhead had removed the headphones she gave a smile. “So, a Bowie fan now?”

“That was pretty good,” Ranma replied.

“Now then, let’s try something a little more synthetic. Depeche Mode perhaps? We recently received a decent collection of foreign synthpop thanks to a foreigner having to move home so you’ve come at the perfect time to build a distinctive collection,” Maon explained as she put another record on.

Hitting play once Ranma had put the headphones on the small redhead was hit with a barrage of technological sounds. Soon a number of English voices began singing. Enjoying the strongly synthetic sound Ranma glanced over to see the single was called People Are People.

A slew of artists followed: The Buggles, Pet Shop Boys, Alphaville, New Order, Aztec Camera and lastly the B-52s. Ranma was fascinated by all of them. And realised that listening to all this foreign music would certainly help with learning English pronunciation. It seemed to almost be becoming
easier with each song to follow the lyrics.

And then suddenly the next song started up with melancholic sounding lyrics Ranma couldn’t follow at all.

“I thought my English was actually sorta decent these days,” Ranma muttered as the song picked up a bit.

Maon paused the record briefly. “Sorry, yeah, this one isn’t in English. It’s from Nena, she’s German.”

“Oh,” was about all the small redhead could say. It did sound enough like English Ranma had to guess the two countries were close by, but that’s about all Ranma really knew. That and some distant memories of history class were Germany was mentioned during a war or three.

Having acquired a small pile of albums already, Ranma realised it was time to hurry over to the cash register lest this shopping trip cost a fortune. Ranma found Hibari and Shui not far away, the elegant redhead having helped Shui acquire a good pile of Japanese albums. Seeing Ranma approach Hibari turned around and lit up at the sight of all the albums Ranma had picked out.

“Ooh, Pet Shop Boys! A good choice. B-52s are very nice too from what little I’ve heard. And Bowie is always good,” Hibari said, leaning over to Ranma’s personal space. Her chest rubbed against the shorter redhead’s shoulder.

Knowing that the softness Ranma felt was from Hibari’s actual body rather than padding like it usually was made the shiver that ran down Ranma’s spine at the contact stronger than usual. “T-thanks.”

“We should go pay now, yes?” Shui asked.

Maon had reached the cash before them and was smiling happily as they approached. It took her only a moment to ring up the nine records Ranma had purchased. “That will be 5 432 yen please.”

“F-five thousand... I got a little carried away. Maybe I’ll put some of it back,” Ranma said with a bit of sadness. All the records were so good...

Hibari slid past and placed a 5000 yen note with a few coins on the counter. “Don’t worry, I’ve got you covered.”

Ranma turned to thank her, but was intercepted by Hibari leaning in to whisper in Ranma’s ear: “It pays to have a sugar momma.”

Ranma felt torn between blushing and objecting, which instead result in the smaller redhead breaking into a giggling fit.

With Ranma’s purchase paid for Shui moved forward and dropped off the selection Hibari had helped with.

“4 205 yen please, sir,” Maon said, blushing a bit as she looked at the hunk across the counter.

Shui nodded and produced the cash required after a quick glance revealed Hibari was busy invading Ranma’s personal space and giving the smaller redhead a tickle attack. Which was making Ranma’s giggling fit grow even worse.

After a moment’s hesitation Shui leaned down and said to both of them: “We go somewhere else
now?"

“Oh! Yeah. There’s another store just down the street we need to visit,” Hibari replied, straightening up and heading confidently towards the door.

Ranma meanwhile was looking severely embarrassed while hurrying after the taller redhead. That giggling fit was serious non-masculine, and Ranma’s blush had reached the curvy cursed boy’s ears at this point.

The next store on Hibari’s shopping list proved to be a clothing boutique. Just as was the case with the record store the women working there seemed to be reasonably familiar with Hibari and thrilled to see her.

“Oh! You dyed your hair,” the girl with longer black hair said.


The other girl, with short brown hair, produced a tray from behind the counter with a tea kettle and several cups. “We’ve decided to start offering free tea for customers, if you or your friends would like any?”

“I-I’m fine! Thank you,” Hibari said, her voice just the slightest bit frightened.

“And you two?” the girl said, turning to Shui and Ranma.

“I’m good too!” Ranma blurted, scurrying away from the warm water.

“M-me too,” Shui added, moving away only slightly less frantically than Ranma.

Hibari raised an eyebrow at that. Shui had always seemed very careful around soup. Now running away from tea... while she’d seen Shui and Shampoo in the same place it suddenly occurred to Hibari that that didn’t mean Shui lacked a curse.

‘I suppose it’s possible he was born a girl and sought Jusenkyo the same way I’m hoping to go there,’ Hibari thought to herself while aimlessly poking through clothing options. The truth was that she wasn’t really looking to expand her wardrobe. She was much more curious how long Ranma would last in the store without giving in to temptation.

Unfortunately her master plan crumbled as the door rang to signal a new entrant to the store. Glancing over the three of them saw a tall bespectacled lad with a buzz cut and flowing white robes.

Shui’s eye twitched. “Mousse... always Mousse. Can I no have one date? Last I saw you were in parcel being mailed to China!”

“I’d crossed the ocean to prove my love to Shampoo. A second time just further proves my love for her. I just have to free her from this world of deviants. I knew I’d find the three of you soon enough. I just had to wait outside the Oozora compound to track Saotome each day,” the bespectacled Chinese teen announced.

“Track me? I’m good at knowin’ when I’m being tracked, and I ain’t seen ya,” Ranma replied, emerging from between the clothing racks to get a clear view of Mousse.

“Hah! I’ve followed your every move,” Mousse declared. “Why you went to an elementary school on Thursday, drove around and visited a few stores on Friday, or spent half of yesterday grocery shopping I don’t know... but I was there!”
The other three stared in disbelief as they tried to process what Mousse just said. Hibari was the first to recover and shot the boy a judgemental glare.

“You’re as dumb as you are blind. You followed Suzume, Sabu, and Tsugumi. You just got lucky today!” she countered.

“I... Nonetheless I find you three deviants here now at my mercy today!” Mousse announced, attempting to recover his intimidation factor.


Mousse took a moment to look around and see if his beloved was actually somewhere to be seen. After verifying that she wasn’t visible he turned back to Shui. “Hah, I’ll defeat you three either way. For I’ve brought Saotome’s bain!”

The three other teens were confused for a moment as Mousse produced a small balloon.

“This balloon contains water of Jusenkyo’s cat spring,” Mousse announced. “I hit Saotome and he’ll be a lost cause! Hahaha!”

Ranma yelped and slipped back amongst the various clothing racks, while the two attendants yelped and ran to hide in the changerooms (they had no idea what was going on, but saw the fighting stance taken by Shui and Hibari). Mousse however apparently struggled to tell one redhead apart from the other (even while wearing his glasses) and threw the water balloon with surprising speed and accuracy towards Hibari.

Shui could only watch as horror as Hibari proved a sliver too slow at dodging and took the balloon to her face, only to vanish into her clothing. Her yelp of shocked shifted to a feline yowl, though she went silent almost immediately afterwards.

Ranma’s head nervously poked out from between a few dressed to look down at where Hibari had stood. The emergence of a small pale yellow creature from his nightmares from Hibari’s clothing led Ranma to shiver. (A more accurate description was a blue eyed flame point thai cat.)

Both Ranma and Shui saw red. Overcome with rage at Mousse both teens charged him. The speed of their rage filled assault caught Mousse off guard. Ranma managed to leap up enough to punch him in the face, which was followed nearly instantly by Shui’s knee to his gut. The combined blows knocked Mousse into the counter.

Shui was the first to launch a follow up, swinging a fist at Mousse’s head, however the other teen dodged at the last second. Instead Shui’s hand slammed into the edge of the tea tray. Four sets of eyes watched the tea kettle full of hot water fly up into the air. One set watched hopefully, two mostly out of curiosity, while the fourth set watched in terror. The kettle slammed into the ceiling before bouncing down, directly onto Shui’s head.

As the kettle cracked open and spilled it’s hot contents onto Shui the others watched in shock as the handsome boy shrunk down into Shampoo’s curvy form.

“I... Sh-Shampoo?” Ranma stuttered.

The blue haired girl turned around and gave Ranma a weak smile. “N-nihao.”

Ranma’s next question was briefly interrupted by the sounding of Mousse muttering incoherently before fainting and falling over.
Ranma’s own connection to consciousness was also quite tenuous at this stage, but there were questions that needed answering. “You... but when we went to the beach... both of you were there?”

Shampoo’s face fell as she turned away. “Instant twin spring powder. Give bad headache.”

Ranma could only stare as while processing the information. Shui, the handsome and warm boy Ranma had started to open up to the idea of being interested in was a lie. A mere act played by the manipulative and murderous girl standing there. Standing there sobbing?

No. No, it had to be an act too. If she would go through all this to pretend to be someone else then a few crocodile tears were easy.

“Y-you’re even more messed up than I realised,” Ranma muttered, trying to ignore how confusing a subject Shampoo was right now.

What Ranma had to do was figure out how to get Hibari and head home while overcoming how terrifying the redhead found her current form.

***

A few minutes earlier as Mousse prepared to make his move there was another familiar face on the streets of Ikebukuro.

“Stupid water main, breaking on a Sunday,” Ukyo muttered to herself as she peered into various store windows. “A weekday and they’d probably have it fixed by the time I’d opened up shop... bleh. At least what Hibari said was true, there do seem to be a lot of sales going on around here. I’m sure I can find a uniform for Rie to wear.”

The sound of maniacal laughter suddenly drew Ukyo’s attention. Turning around she found herself looking in at a tall guy about her age dressed in white robes confronting... was that really Ranma, Shui, and Hibari? She found herself blinking in disbelief as all chaos broke out in the store.

Hibari was transformed into an adorable kitten? Which seemed to scare Ranma for some reason?

Wait... Shui... Shui was Shampoo?

Taking a moment to compose herself Ukyo burst into the store, spatula drawn in case Shui/Shampoo tried anything.

“Ucchan? W-were you following us?” Ranma asked, the small redhead looking at her with overwhelmed and confused eyes.

“I honestly just happened to be in the area, Ranchan.”

Ukyo just wanted to rush over and wrap Ranma in her arms, telling the adorable petite girl everything would be fine... except that girl was a boy. Ranma would probably call that an insult to masculinity or something. Instead her eyes turned to the cat she knew was Hibari, before looking back towards Ranma.

“You’re scared of her right now... why, Ranma?” she asked.

“I-I’ve got a bad past with cats,” Ranma replied, looking exceptionally embarrassed.

Ukyo nodded and walked over to Hibari to scoop up her and her pile of clothing in one motion. The
cute yellowish cat actually began to purr in Ukyo’s arms.

“Come on, Ranma. Let’s go find her some warm water.”

Ranma nodded and hurried over to follow Ukyo out the door. The redhead paused momentarily on the threshold, turning to look at Shampoo. The Chinese girl was now curled over, sobbing hysterically and for a brief moment Ranma debated halting to comfort her. But the pigtailed teen turned away and ran after Ukyo, convinced this had to be an act. Shampoo was just too cold and ruthless to have actually started to care of them... surely?

Ranma quietly hurried after Ukyo, trying not to look into the bundle of clothing she was carrying. Struggling to forget just what Hibari looked like right now.

After a couple blocks of running Ukyo came to a halt. “This restaurant should have a bathroom. Come on.”

Ranma nodded and followed her into the small and dimly lit udon shop. Ukyo made sure to keep Hibari well hidden in her clothing while walking up to the counter.

“Could I use your washroom quickly?” Ukyo asked the man behind the counter. “If it’s customers only I’ll be happy to buy something afterward.”

The middle aged and partially balding man continued to clean his workspace, but did grunt a reply. “It’s quiet right now. Go ahead.”

“Thank you,” Ukyo replied with a brief bow before rushing off towards the washrooms.

Thankfully they were single occupant and Ukyo ran into the men’s room. She locked the door behind her and placed the pile of clothing which contained Hibari onto the floor. Looking down at her friend who was now a cat while she waited for the sink to heat up Ukyo wondered why Hibari was making that unimpressed face. Of course, maybe that was just the standard face for cats... Ukyo had never really spent all that much time around animals.

Finally the water heated up enough that she hoped it would be enough to change Hibari. Cupping her hands she winced a bit as the near scalding water filled the leaky bowl of her palms. Trying not to spill too much (as she had no idea how much it took to cause a transformation) she carried the water over and split her hands apart above Hibari.

The small cat was replaced with a very naked Hibari in the blink of an eye. A transformation that caused Ukyo to blush furiously and spin away as she processed just what she’d seen.

“Sorry! I... I didn’t mean to peak,” Ukyo said, staring intently at the wall away from Hibari.

The blonde in question was busy pulling her undergarments on. “It’s... well, you’ve seen guys naked in the changeroom all the time, so... I’m willing to guess you didn’t see anything new,” Hibari sighed.

“That makes sense. It did feel different when I saw you compared to the girls in gym,” Hibari said as she pulled her dress over her head. “I’m definitely going to put these in clothes in the laundry and get a bath when I get home... It’s safe to turn around though.”

Ukyo did so, and felt more comfortable seeing Hibari fully clothed. “Are you okay though? Your voice sounds kind of funny.”
“Eep! I managed to keep up that instant Jusenkyo long enough I forgot about pitching up,” Hibari replied, her voice sliding back up to its normal pitch. “Thank you for catching that.”

The pair headed out into the main restaurant to find a tiny redhead consuming a bowl of udon, while three empty bowls sat on the counter already.

“S-sorry,” Ranma said after putting what was now the fourth empty bowl down. “I was sorta panickin’ and there was food here an’... eatin’ kinda calms me down sometimes.”

Ranma quickly handed over the money for lunch, scooped up the bag with the records purchased earlier and they set off. Ukyo still needed to do her shopping, but was happy to walk them back to the train station.

As they walked every slightest sign of cold water made Hibari jump, usually trying to hide behind Ranma. The small redhead however would flinch every time they touched. Ukyo felt a brief sense of opportunity at Ranma’s sudden apprehension around her main competition, but that feeling was replaced with a tsunami of guilt. Hibari was her friend too, and the new tension was in no way Hibari’s fault.

* * *

Mousse woke up with a splitting headache. As his eyes adjusted to the dark he realised he was shackled to a spot on the floor. Fussing a bit with the chains led to a nasty clanking noise.

Suddenly the far side of the wall split open into a blast of blinding light, and a figure walked towards him.

«Put your glasses on, Mousse,» Shampoo’s voice ordered in the dialect of their homeland.

Mousse reached up and found that his glasses were resting on his forehead. He slid them down to take in Shampoo’s beauty. He was still very groggy, but some part of his brain was trying to warn him about... well, he wasn’t sure, but it involved Shampoo.

«You’ve ruined things for me, Mousse. And you’ve quite possibly ruined things between my beloveds. Why can’t you just take a hint?» Shampoo asked, her tone harsher than Mousse had ever heard.

«I just want to save you... not only are those foreigners unworthy of you, but they would rather spend time with a third... deviant than enjoy your company. I can’t see you trapped like that,» Mousse replied, attempting to sound as noble and courageous as possible.

«Third... you idiot. I always knew you had selective hearing and sight, but memory too?» Shampoo shot back before producing a bottle of water. She poured it over her head and shifted into her male cursed form.

Mousse felt the revelation of earlier flood into his brain and he very nearly fainted again, but for Shui slapping him. Mousse held onto consciousness, but found himself unable to look up at Shui’s form.

«I knew it. Even you won’t look at me like this,» Shui said before grabbing Mousse’s jaw and forcing him to look at her. Her voice was dripping with anger. «You’d better look though. To get a small taste of what you’re doing to Ranma and Hibari. Come on... what’s wrong? You’d always watch me when I told you not to, back when we were young.»

Mousse closed his eyes and winced, «H-he’s n-not really cursed. I was going to curse them both properly, but when I’d almost filled a barrel with water from the cat spring that sniveling peon of
Beijing caught me. He hit me with a spray bottle like some common tomcat and tried to chase me down. I had to dive into his shack to escape, and managed to grab a few packets of Instant Jusenkyo. T—that’s what I used.»

Shui’s face shifted into one of Shampoo’s classic full face smiles for a brief moment. Normally that was a sight Mousse would give anything to see, but this wasn’t the face of Shampoo that he loved so much. That and it was replaced with a local of total contempt.

«Your incompetence has saved your skin, Mousse. At least for now, » Shui all but spat before leaving and locking the door behind her.

Once she was a few paces from the door the sense of relief that at least something hadn’t gone totally wrong today led to Shui skipping down the hall towards the telephone. Excitedly the cursed girl dialed the family number to the Oozora home.

“Hello?” Tsugumi’s voice asked from the other side.

“This is Shui. I do not know what Ranma and Hibari have said, but have good news. Stupid Mousse only use Jusenkyo powder. Hibari not cursed,” Shui explained giddily.

“Oh? Oh! Yes... little br-sister will be thrilled to hear that. But... what happened today? Hibari and Ranma both came home in a terrible mood,” Tsugumi asked.

“I-it is complicated. Not my place to explain,” Shui replied, her heart dropping once more. “But please, tell I am sorry. Sorry for everything.”

* * *

Having heard that Hibari’s transformation was a one off put Ranma at ease, but Shui’s true identity still left the pigtailed martial artist (now back in male form) with a headache. Shui was a girl with the opposite curse. Ukyo and Hibari were both girls by opposite definitions. Staring at the ceiling Ranma was left with one thought.

“None of this makes any sense... what even is gender?”
Am I Ready?

Flying through the air is generally not the first sensation someone expects to hit them when they wake up. Ranma was certainly disoriented for a split second, but there was only really one probable explanation. Genma had been pouting ever since he’d found out about the date with ‘Shui’. While he’d taken some solace the night before when Ranma and Hibari had been telling Tsugumi what happened (Genma had of course been eavesdropping), laughing heartily with Ibari that their “sons” still had some hope yet (going on a date with a ‘babe’ like Shampoo), Ranma had gotten the impression Genma was still deeply unsettled by the date.

Slamming into the wall, Ranma let out a grunt. Eyes opening reluctantly, Ranma was greeted to the sight of Genma standing and laughing by the bed.

“Come on boy, I’ve got to work on toughening you up. There’s still hope for you. You just need to get back on The Path of Manliness!”

“Listen, Pops, I don’t really care... but if ya want a fight, I can give ya one,” Ranma replied, standing back up and taking a ready stance.

The two Saotomes lunged at each other ferociously. Genma, however, had warmed up, while Ranma was still half asleep, and the difference in readiness became clear quickly. The pigtailed teen was soon flying out the window, the sound of shattering glass drawing the attention of the few Oozora thugs out on patrol.

Shouts and battle cries followed as Genma and Ranma battled with an intensity neither had brought to bear against the other in some time. The pair bounded across the rooftops of the Oozora compound, meeting in the air to exchange a flurry of kicks and punches faster than most of the household could follow.

And, of course, with how much racket the two were making, the entire household was awake by now. Most had gathered in the courtyard to watch as the two completed yet another lap around the complex. Tsubame had chosen to stay in bed and try to hide from the noise under her pillows (muttering that the sun wasn’t even up yet), but the rest of the household found the fights between the two a spectacle worth watching.

Hibari was starting to debate if she should join in when Genma landed a roundhouse into Ranma’s gut. The black-haired teen went flying into the courtyard, on a clear trajectory towards the koi pond. That was, of course, no surprise; fights between the two of them generally ended with at least one damp Saotome.

It was only at the last second that Hibari realised Ranma’s trajectory was headed directly for—

*Crack*

The sound of Ranma’s skull hitting the stone bridge that crossed the pond was sickening. Hibari leapt into the water, pulling the small redhead to shore and checking for blood. With hair so bright red it was hard to tell.

“Hibari, let me,” Tsugumi said softly as she produced a first aid kit.

Hibari nodded and backed away. She knew her sister had her fair share of first aid experience.
Hibari was pacing in the hallway as she waited for word on Ranma’s condition.

‘If he hasn’t woken up yet... is he going to? Maybe he’s in a coma? I should have intervened,’ Hibari thought as she grew ever more worried.

Her pacing stopped as she tried to calm her mind down a bit. There was no use in beating herself up. She took a few more breaths to try to calm down.

Then she heard Ranma’s voice.

Bursting into the room Hibari found the small redhead giggling while Tsugumi looked on with confusion written across her face.

“Ranma! Ranma, are you okay?” Hibari asked as she rushed forward. Maybe getting up in Ranma’s face wasn’t the best thing to do when someone had just regained consciousness, but she’d been worried.

“I’m fine,” the petite redhead replied cutely, giggling a bit. “There’s no need for everybody to be so worried about me.”

“B-but you hit your head,” Hibari protested. That was when she realised something. “W-why are you using ‘atashi’?”

The smaller teen stared at her, innocent confusion dancing across those big blue eyes. “Why wouldn’t I? It’s cute.”

Hibari froze up, not sure how to reply. Luckily Tsugumi was a bit quicker with a response.

“You usually don’t want to be called cute or girly,” she said.

“Well that’s silly. Why wouldn’t I? I am a girl, aren’t I?” Ranma replied.

Hibari and Tsugumi exchanged glances. Tsugumi was confused, while Hibari was surprised by the speed of this. Surely finding out Shui was Shampoo shouldn’t have caused that much of a change.

“Ranma! My boy! You’re awake!” Genma shouted happily as he, Ibari, and Seiji hurried into the room.

“Eep!” Ranma squeaked as Seiji’s size apparently surprised the petite redhead.

“What’s the matter with you boy? Shrieking like some girl? I raised you tougher than this,” Genma half shouted as he stuck his face up to Ranma. “Haven’t I taught you how to be a man?”

Ranma responded by scurrying backwards to hide behind Hibari. From behind the blonde Ranma spoke out with surprising timidity. “Y-you did. And that was a... a very mean thing to do to your daughter.”

“D-dau... You!” Genma bellowed, grabbing Hibari by the shirt and pulling her forward. “You did this! Y-your perversion’s contagious, isn’t it!”

Hibari was ready with a snappy comeback when the tiny redhead darted forward and hit Genma with an uppercut. Caught totally off guard the solidly built man was knocked from his feet.

“D-don’t you hurt her!” Ranma shouted before clinging to Hibari once again. “Eep! I hit daddy... I didn’t mean to fight.”
Ibari, apparently being smart enough to not risk a punch to the face, decided to take a more welcoming and diplomatic approach. Crouching down to be at about eye level with Ranma he put on a gentle fatherly smile.

“So... you’re a girl now, are you?”

Ranma nodded.

“And I see you still like Hibari,” the mustachioed father of the Oozoras asked.

Ranma nodded again, whispering, “She’s my friend.”

Ibari smiled. “Then maybe the engagement’s not so bad. You being the wife makes it work much better.”

“Excuse me... but shouldn’t we be taking Ranma to a hospital? Or at least a clinic? A major blow like that should probably be checked by a doctor!” Hibari announced, shoving herself between this suddenly shy Ranma and her father, and struggling to contain her anger. (Why was her father so quick to accept Ranma being a girl? But not her, no matter what she tried?) “We need to find out if Ranma has amnesia or brain damage or... something.”

“Hoho- let’s not look a gift horse in the mouth,” Ibari replied. “Now you’ve got yourself a proper fiancée I see no reason to try to change anything.”

“Now wait just a minute!” Genma shouted, “I’m not about to give up on my son. He’s supposed to carry on my legacy of Saotome Style Anything Goes!”

Hibari and Ranma found themselves being gently led out of the room by Tsugumi as the two fathers argued. She led the pair over to the dining room where Suzume was waiting impatiently.

“Yay! You’re alive!” the small blue haired girl shouted as she rushed over and hugged Ranma from the side.

Ranma hugging her back caused her to stiffen a bit. That wasn’t usual...

“Are-are you okay, Ranma-chan?” Suzume asked nervously.

“Never better, Suzume-chan,” Ranma replied, giving the girl a warm smile. “I... I feel like I’m free of a dark shadow. I’m the real me now.”

Suzume backed away a little, unsettled by Ranma’s completely changed demeanor. “Hi-Hibari-chan... why is Ranma talking funny?”

Hibari grimaced a bit. “Well, I’m not totally sure. Ranma might still be a little scrambled after hitting the bridge... We’ll have to wait and see.”

Ranma’s face fell as she took a seat at the table. “I... I thought if anyone would be happy for me... that it would be you, Hibari. D-didn’t you want me to be one of the girls?”

Hibari hurried over and placed a hand on Ranma’s shoulder. “Ranma... I...”

She froze up. For once in her life Hibari had no idea what to say. If Ranma wanted to be a girl... well, she’d suspected it for a while, but this. This was such a sudden change. It didn’t feel natural. Hibari had hoped Ranma would talk to her about things before acting too.

Tsugumi used the silence to excuse herself and get to work on breakfast. Suzume, however, stayed,
watching her older sister and Ranma with rapt attention, curious as always.

The blonde was preparing to explain her worries when the door to the hallway slammed open. Turning, all three of them were surprised to see Tsubame trembling in rage.

“No! Not you too! You’re a guy, Ranma! You too, Hibari! Stop messing around like this,” the brown haired Oozora girl shouted. “I refuse to live in a home filled with perverts.”

Hibari whipped around, standing up to glare at her sister. “We’re not perverts. I don’t know how many times I have to tell you... but I’m getting tired of it.”

There was something cold in Hibari’s voice for a moment that made Tsubame back away. Making an indignant face as she realised there was no one in the room ready to take her side Tsubame frowned and stormed off.

Hibari smiled, glad to have chased Tsubame off, and turned back around to sit beside Ranma. The small girl was fidgeting with her undershirt.

“C-can I change into something more feminine? These clothes are just no good,” Ranma whispered.


*A * * *

A bitter Genma sat at the kitchen table, staring at the spotless surface. He had to fix this. If Ranma stayed like this... they were both dead. It would take rather a lot more than a kettle to turn Ranma back properly male this time though... or would it?

Shooting up into a dramatic pose of victory Genma let out a cry of joy. “Of course, the jolt of returning male should bring him to his senses!”

“I suppose it might,” Tsugumi commented as she finished up the morning dishes.

Genma pulled out a kettle and set it to heat. After a few minutes it began to whistle and he picked it up, heading out of the kitchen to track down his wayward son.

It didn’t take long to find Ranma out in the garden, happily smelling flowers. Genma winced. Ranma was giving off a severely feminine air, nearly prancing from flower to flower. Hibari and Suzume sat watching quietly, and to Genma’s eyes neither of them seemed nearly as feminine as Ranma was acting.

“Boy, this will be for your own good!” Genma announced as he drew the kettle and charged.

The tiny redhead swerved gracefully, on a constant retreat to avoid Genma’s attempts to pour the kettle on her head. Her constant dodging left him turning red in the face.

“Either cooperate or fight like a man!” Genma shouted.

“No. No! I hate fighting,” Ranma yelped as she dodged another stream of hot water.

“Hates fighting? Ranma?” Hibari whispered under her breath as she watched.

Genma redoubled his efforts to catch Ranma with the hot water, but just as it looked like he was about to succeed his kettle ran dry. A confident smile flashed on Ranma’s face before she replaced it with something far more cute and coy.
“I don’t know why you wanted to go and do something so mean to-” Ranma began to say to Genma when hot water poured down on her head.

“I’ve had it with you deviants,” Tsubame declared, standing behind Ranma as she finished emptying her kettle on Ranma’s head.

“Good work girl, taking advantage of my distraction,” Genma boasted.

Ranma however seemed to be in a state of shock, taking in the physical changes that the hot water had produced. After a few moments of silence Ranma ran off into the Oozora home, wearing a look of pure terror. A few seconds later a sound best described as a feminine scream with a masculine voice echoed across the yard.

Tsubame’s eye twitched. “Fine, I guess he’s keeping up the act... well, I’m going to school. I’ve had enough.”

Genma took on a stiff appearance with a thousand metre stare. Hibari and Suzume both walked over. Hibari waved her hand in front of Genma’s face to no response. Suzume then poked him in the side. Several times. With not insignificant force.

“I’m dead,” Genma said, apparently not noticing either of them.

The bespectacled Saotome patriarch wandered off, still in his trance.

“What’s he talking about?” Suzume asked.

“I have no idea,” Hibari replied, shrugging.

* * *

Ranma hurried after Hibari down the busy commercial street. The small redhead tried her best to cling to the taller girl, seeming nervous about everything.

“Well, Ranma, if you’re a girl now you need better outfits,” Hibari explained. “Obviously an emergency of this magnitude warrants a day off school.”

Ranma nodded.

“I think we’ll start with undergarments. You’ve got a couple bras, but they are pretty boyish,” Hibari said, studying Ranma’s face out of the corner of her eye. She saw none of the apprehension she was expecting, which only made her more worried.

* * *

The Tendo breakfast table was usually quiet and peaceful. Usually.

“What!”? Akane shouted, slamming her hand onto the table. “Why should I have to train him?”

Kasumi managed to catch the plates that had been jostled toward falling off the table by the force of her youngest sister’s blow.

“Well, a young man living at a dojo like this should really know our school,” Soun explained, shrinking behind his newspaper. “Kousaku asked me about it, and I think training him would be a good part of your journey to master status.”

“And why can’t you train him?” Akane asked, pouting a bit.
“You know I threw my knee out,” Soun replied meekly.

“I-if she’s that opposed to it, I’ll okay with not learning,” Kousaku offered nervously, as Akane glared at him.

“No. As a father, and a master of my school, I must insist,” Soun replied. Glancing over to see Akane still glaring at him Soun burst into tears. “Oh no... my little girl doesn’t respect her father any longer!”

Akane sighed and softened her posture. “Fine daddy... but I won’t go easy on him.”

Kousaku swallowed nervously. This was going to be a long day... why did they have to shut the school today due to ‘structural precautions’ or whatever after that earthquake...? Looking at the smile on Akane’s face as she thought up lessons Kousaku was certain he’d be safer in a condemned building than in the Tendo Dojo today.

Kousaku’s thoughts about his imminent demise were interrupted by knocking at the front door.

“I’ll get it,” Kousaku announced while hurrying out of the family room.

Opening the front door he was met with the face of a broken man. Genma’s eyes were aimless as he stared ahead.

“U-uh... Uncle Soun? Sir? It’s... it’s your friend Saotome,” Kousaku called out.

Soun hurried forth, accompanied by Akane.

“Saotome-kun, what’s happened to you?” Soun asked as he walked up to his friend.

Genma seemed to revive at the sound of his old friend’s voice. “Tendo-kun... you know how I haven’t been wanting to talk about the situation with Ranma and the engagement much? Well, I’ve changed my mind. Let’s find a bar... I have a lot to say.”

Soun looked his friend in the eyes and saw the distress there. “Of course, of course. I’ll just tell Kasumi I’ll be gone today, won’t be a moment.”

As Soun headed into the kitchen Genma found himself under the concerned eyes of Kousaku and the judgemental eyes of Akane. The youngest Tendo girl could tell the man was in too much distress to confront right now, but she still had questions for him about that red haired girl she had talked to. She compromised by giving him an unapproving stare.

“All right, Saotome, old friend, let’s go,” Soun said as he emerged from the kitchen.

* * *

Ranma’s stomach grumbling signalled it was time for lunch. Honestly the only surprise was that it had taken this long for Ranma’s stomach to protest having not been fed. The bags of clothing both girls were carrying and the cute dress Ranma wore showed how long and productive their shopping expedition had been. Still, Ranma felt it appropriate to apologise for the noise.

Hibari smiled weakly and checked her watch. There was still a good hour left to kill...

“Ranma, I’ll take the bags and you go get some food for us. There’s a couple street vendors just down the block,” Hibari said as they walked towards the stalls in question.

Ranma gave a warm and wide smile. “Sure thing. I could really go for tamagoyaki right now.”
“Sounds good,” Hibari replied.

Watching Ranma hurry up to the stall Hibari smiled. Sure, Ranma was acting strange, but scamming free food, that was something Ranma could never resist, she was sure.

“There you go miss, and I must say, for a girl as cute as you I think it should be half off today,” the vendor said as he handed the food over. He was clearly trying to flirt, despite realising the gorgeous redhead before him was way out of his league.

“Oh no sir, I couldn’t do that. You have bills to pay. I insist on full price,” Ranma replied as she fished out the bills.

Hibari struggled to keep footing as Ranma’s smiling face turned to her.

* * *

“You know, we’ve walked a long way today,” Ranma mentioned as the pair walked along beside a park. “We have to be half way across Nerima by now.”

“Not quite, but close,” Hibari replied as their destination at last came into sight. “We just have a little visit to make.”

“Oh? Where-” Ranma began to ask before she recognised the building up ahead. Dr. Tofu’s clinic. She’d only been there once before, but it had been a memorable trip.

“Tsugumi booked an appointment. We really should get your bump checked out, but dad told our family doctor not to see you,” Hibari explained. “Plus, if there’s anything weird with your curse Dr. Tofu is probably about the only one around who would notice.”

Ranma grimaced. “I told you, I feel fine. We don’t need to go see any doctors.”

“It would make Tsugumi feel better,” Hibari replied softly.

“Okay, okay,” Ranma relented.

Hibari smiled and led the smaller girl by the hand off to the clinic. Entering they found the waiting room surprisingly empty, and Dr. Tofu smiling happily and staring into space while holding a small stack of books. Both girls were taken a bit aback by his state, though the sound of Hibari clearing her throat broke him out of it.

“Oh! Oozora-chan and Saotome-kun, it’s good to see you,” he said happily, setting the books down on the counter. “Now, if I remember correctly... Ranma, you bumped your head, yes?”

The redhead nodded.

“Mhm, come follow me to the examination room,” Tofu instructed.

Ranma went ahead, with Hibari following behind Tofu. The blonde was unsure if she would be allowed in, and was quite happy when Dr. Tofu waited for her to enter the room before closing the door. Tofu then led Ranma over to the examination bed, while Hibari took a seat in an open chair.

After a few moments of prodding and massaging Ranma’s head Dr. Tofu stepped back. “Hm, yes. It does look like you suffered a concussion. You don’t seem to have any bleeding or neck injury. Have you been nauseous at any point?”
“No, not really.”

“Glad to hear it. I’d say it looks like a mild concussion, but you should be able to stay at home. Tsugumi seems to understand medical matters enough I trust her to observe you,” Tofu explained.

“What about Ranma’s behaviour? Does it have to do with the curse?” Hibari asked.

Ranma seemed ready to protest, but was interrupted by Tofu.

“I-oh yes, Tsugumi mentioned that on the phone. I’m not detecting anything that should cause a shift in behaviour. In fact, Ranma’s chi feels much the same as his last visit,” Tofu replied.

Hibari deflated a bit and grew lost in thought. Her one explanation for Ranma’s sudden shift in personality had just been pulled out from under her.

Tofu noticed both Hibari’s sudden withdrawal and Ranma’s look of guilty concern watching her. “I have a bit of paperwork to do, I’ll leave you two be for now.”

Ranma watched him leave, and winced slightly as the doctor shut the door behind him. It was clear the intention was for the two of them to talk. After a few moments to gather her thoughts Ranma spoke up.

“You don’t like me anymore, do you?”

Hibari blinked and her eyes rose from examining the floor to look the redhead over. “I... I don’t know you anymore. I’m still finding out if I like this you or not.”

“I thought you wanted me to go girl,” Ranma half mumbled, it was her turn to study the linoleum.

“My plan wasn’t to make you do anything, it was to help you find yourself. Well, no... my plan to help Ranma find themself. This new you... You’re someone totally different. You’re soft and fragile and... and some sort of perfect daughter. We might be able to become friends, but I don’t like that being at the cost of the Ranma I love,” Hibari replied. As she talked she pulled her feet up from the floor to hug her knees, and as she finished up she began to cry.

Ranma looked back up at her with guilty eyes, though Ranma kept her own tears in her eyes. “I guess I was kinda layin’ it on a little too thick. Sorry.”

Hibari stopped crying to stare at Ranma. “Pardon?”

“Well, after I woke up my brain was all jumbled up. I did honestly forget who I was for a minute or two. An’ when I was piecin’ things together I landed on the obvious conclusion I was a girl. Even after things got back in order it didn’t really feel wrong exactly, an’ so I figured if somethin’ like a little bump on the head could scramble me up maybe I wasn’t that much of a guy,” the redhead confessed.

Hibari stared at Ranma with her jaw hanging open, but no words escaping.

“An’ when I thought about how bein’ a man was something my pops stressed so much... an’ how ignorin’ him about you had been a smart thing... I figured ‘why not pretend I’d been totally scrambled’. An’ so I tried to act the opposite of everythin’ he told me to be,” Ranma explained, scratching the back of her head nervously.

Hibari took a few seconds to piece together a reply as she stared in shock. “You mean the whole thing was an act?”
“Heh, yeah, I figured I’d go all in. Ya know?”

“Why didn’t you tell me!?” Hibari half shouted, jumping to her feet. “I was so worried about you! I thought I’d lost you to some new personality!”

Ranma shrank back a bit. “I didn’t really have a chance ta at home, and once we were out... I dunno, I wanted ta see how long I could keep it up convincin’ly.”

Hibari’s face scrunched up in rage as she stomped over to Ranma. Unconsciously she raised a balled fist, though caught herself before she could lash out. Her father’s constant use of violence may have left an impression on how her body wanted to respond to anger, but she wasn’t going down that route. Instead she broke the fist by extending a finger to jab Ranma accusatively.

“Never do that again! Got it? I... I... Just talk to me, okay? I can’t be there for you if you don’t tell me things first,” Hibari shouted, struggling to hold back tears.

Ranma straightened her back and prepared an angry retort, but found herself struggling to actually use it. Objectively she had messed up. Yet... she was realising she needed to better understand who she was. Which felt like something she wouldn’t always be able to talk about. Stuck between pride and love she ended up settling on pouting.

“Fine. I’ll try next time,” Ranma grumbled.

Hibari continued to stand over her, waiting impatiently for an apology that wasn’t coming. After a few moments the blonde broke away, deeply unimpressed. “Whatever, let’s go home.”
Ranma and Hibari worked out a plan on the way home. The pair had agreed to claim Dr. Tofu had ‘cured’ Ranma of the supposed effects of that head blow (to Ibari’s dismay), allowing the pigtailed teen to return to loving martial arts and swindling vendors out of their food. Otherwise known as ‘being Ranma’. The pair then snuck up stairs with their shopping bags.

Once the door to Ranma’s room was closed Hibari put down her bags and pulled out some of the outfits they’d bought and laid them out on Ranma’s bed.

“So, are you actually going to wear these?” Hibari asked, looking down at the highly feminine dresses.

“I-er, maybe?” Ranma mumbled, blushing a bit. “Th-they are cute.”

“Cute is definitely your style. That number you wore to flirt with Ryoga was adorable,” Hibari replied, leaning forward into the redhead’s personal space with a smile. “Also good that we know your proper bra size. I had to guess a bit. I was close though.”

Ranma blushed a bit, having found the measuring process deeply embarrassing. Thinking over how overwhelming her attempt at diving headlong into femininity had been, Ranma remembered someone else who’d be just as overwhelmed by trying that.

“Ucchan! I really should go tell Ucchan about this plan.”

“Sure, sounds good,” Hibari replied. Ukyo was clearly the next project on Hibari’s plate.

* * *

Ucchan’s was quiet right now. The after school rush had ended, while the dinner rush had not yet begun. Which meant Ukyo was taking the time to test her new waitress’ cooking abilities. (A good distraction from her mind wanting to wander back to how both Ranma and Hibari had been absent from classes that day. What had they been up to?)

“Oh no. That’s not a very good circle,” Rie said, chastising herself under her breath.

“Perfect takes time luv,” Ukyo replied, trying to reassure the girl. “Keep going.”

Rie gave a quick determined nod and went back to work. She pushed on through the rest of the cooking process with a focus Ukyo could appreciate. The end result however...

“Tolerable,” Ukyo said after tasting a bit, “for a Tokyoite. You’ll need a lot more practice before I’m trust you at the grill with customers.”

Rie gave a deep bow. “I am deeply sorry, sensei.”

“Hey now, there’s no need-” Ukyo began, when the ringing of the door chime distracted her. Turning she saw her favourite redhead. “Ranchan! It’s great to see you!”

“Hey, Ucchan. I... I’ve got somethin’ ta talk about,” Ranma said nervously, looking around to make sure the restaurant was currently as empty as it seemed.

Ukyo was briefly beside herself with joy at the idea Ranma might have something personal to tell her. At least until she saw Hibari walking too.
“Hello Ukyo. Oh, and... Kawai-chan, right?” the blonde said.

“Hey Hibari,” Ukyo replied. Her tone was slightly flatter than intended.

“H-hello!” Rie added. “I... should I go out back and slice some more cabbage?”

“That’s Ranchan’s choice,” Ukyo said as she turned to the redhead in question.

“Uh...” Ranma glanced quickly to Hibari who simply shrugged. Disappointed, Ranma turned to waitress in training, noting what she looked like properly for the first time. The conclusion was simple: she was cute. A fact that distracted the red haired cutie momentarily. “Are ya good at keepin’ stuff on the downlow?”

“Yes. Definitely. I’m very quiet,” Rie replied in a nervous whisper.

Ranma shrugged. “Alright. I guess I might start bein’ public in the nearish future, so one extra person knowin’ ain’t the end a tha world.”

Ranma then proceeded to give a brief overview of what had happened when she hit her head, and how the scrambled perspective had left her with questions about who she was. Ranma did make sure to skip over why Hibari had impacted the decision though, thanks to Rie’s presence. Ukyo was able to read between the lines easily enough, however.

“In typical Ranma fashion she tried to jump straight into the deep end before learning to swim,” Hibari said as Ranma was wrapping up.

“Hey, if you’re gonna try somethin’ then give 100%,” Ranma countered. “But... I’ll admit I kinda got in over my head.”

Ukyo let out a chuckle. “110% seems more your style Ranchan.”

“F-forgive me if this is presumptuous,” Rie said quietly. “Does this mean you and Hibari will be breaking up?”

Ranma and Hibari both blinked in synch, turned to look at each other, before turning back to Rie with confusion on their faces. (While Ukyo went a bit pale, worried Rie was pushing to help her new boss’ love life.)

Ranma shrugged. “Whether or not I’m a girl seems like a whole separate thing from whether or not I like girls. Least, as I understand the concept.”

Looking over at Ukyo, Rie nodded. “I-I suppose that’s true. There’s boys who like boys. Girls who like girls. And... so many of my classmates have been confused about liking you Ranma.”

“So, Ranchan, are you gonna start attending school in girl mode, or...?”

“Not yet. Hibari pointed out that the girls might not respond well to it, and I should get to know bein’ a girl better before switchin’ totally,” Ranma admitted.

“I suppose that makes sense,” Ukyo said, before pulling out ingredients for okonomiyaki. “Well, I can’t let two friends visit without eating. What toppings do you guys want?”

* * *

School was weird. Ranma’s new feminine paradigm didn’t mesh very well with attending classes as male. The pigtailed teen struggled with the fact that, well, it wasn’t a struggle to act male. Second
and third guessing would plague Ranma the entire morning. Had the clarity of the previous day just been an illusion?

At least Shui had yet to make an appearance. Ranma didn’t need that added complication.

Walking with Hibari and Ukyo towards their usual lunch location Ranma suddenly became self conscious of every step. Was that too much hip sway? Could everyone tell? It was overwhelming.

“Excuse me, sirs et madame, I am looking for ze child of one Saotome Genma,” a foreign accented voice said from behind the trio. Turning they were greeted by the sight of a middle aged man of European descent with an almost comically pointed mustache.

“That’s me. Saotome Ranma,” the black haired teen replied.

The mysterious foreigner looked Ranma up and down for a moment. “A, un fils. There had been some confusion if Saotome’s child was a boy or a girl. The feast invitation was only for a daughter. I shall bid vous adieu.”

“Wait! Y-you want my sister. Let me go get her,” Ranma replied quickly, before ducking around a corner and running to the nearest out of sight water fountain.

A moment later a redhead appeared with a large grin on her face. “I’m invited to a feast, am I? Sounds like fun.”

“And you are?”

“Oh, silly me. Saotome Ran-” Ranma froze. She couldn’t give the same name in such short succession. Quick, what was a female name she could use... Ran... Ranko maybe? That seemed good. Now just to finish and-

“Saotome Ran, yes, very well. If you would follow me, a car is waiting to take you to the Chardin Estate.”

Ranma blinked. Right. Ran was on its own a functional girl’s name. “D-do I get a plus one or anythin’?”

“Non. The guest list is very exclusive.”

Ranma turned to give Ukyo and Hibari a guilty smile. “Well, see you guys later, I guess.”

* * *

The drive to the Chardin Estate was much longer than Ranma had expected. As she watched the city start to fade into farmland, she began to wonder just how much further they had to go. Just as she was about to ask they turned off the main road and only a few minutes later the sprawling villa grew visible.

The car came to a halt near the front door, and as Ranma let herself out (to the protest of the chauffeur) another servant came to lead her to the dining room. She realised after a couple minutes that the route was deliberately scenic, no doubt meant to impress upon her the wealth of this foreign family.

The tour’s eventual end was Ranma’s favourite part though. She’d barely had a chance to eat in the car ride over and was now firmly starving. Reaching the dining table she was annoyed to see the table was empty, but for a few name cards.
Wandering over she quickly spotted her own. Saotome was spelled how she was used to, but ‘Ran’ was not. They had not chosen the chaotic 乱 she was used to. Nor the flowery 藤 she had expected. No, it was the far more mundane 卵.

“Egg, huh? I dunno if that’s girlier than orchid or not,” she muttered as she fussed with the name card.

She was about to read the others were the door opened and three girls walked in. Two looked about her age, while the other was older, on the cusp of adulthood. The one with long dark, almost blueish, hair she recognised, but where from?

“Oh! Saotome! What a surprise. It’s me, Tendo Akane... We talked for a little bit at that festival last month,” the girl said, a warm smile filling her face.

“Ohakane-oh right! Yeah, I remember ya,” Ranma (or perhaps Ran in this context) replied, landing her fist in her palm as she placed the girl. “With the dojo! I’ve been so busy! Sorry, I did mean ta check it out.”

“Oh, a friend of yours?” the shorter haired sister asked coolly. “Looks like even more of a tomboy than you.”

“Well, we’ve met... I should handle introductions though. These are my sisters, Nabiki’s the icy one. And this is Kasumi, she’s the foundation of our whole family really,” Akane explained happily.

“You’re too kind Akane,” Kasumi replied, smiling happily as she bowed. (Nabiki too gave a brief bow. Almost so shallow as to be more insulting than no bow.)

“It’s a pleasure to meet you. I’m Ran-Saotome Ran,” the redhead replied, struggling to stop herself from finishing her given name. It would seem odd to give a different name than the one on the card, surely?

“Honhon! 4 lovely ladies as dining companions, what a treat!”

Ranma and the Tendo sisters turned to see a blonde young man flanked by a stern looking brown haired woman standing in a doorway on the far side of the room. Both were clearly of European descent, and dressed in high end, yet rather outdated looking, clothing.

“Bonjour mademoiselles, I am Picolet Chardin II, and I shall be your host for today’s meal. There is much to discuss, but first!” the blonde paused as the stern woman clapped her hands.

Suddenly a wave of waiters and waitress appeared, carrying inumerable dishes. In the flow of it all Ranma found herself seated at the table beside the youngest Tendo girl. Chardin and the mysterious woman sat across from them, though were almost half hidden by the centrepiece. (Well, half hidden for most. With Ranma’s small stature she couldn’t see them at all.)

As the commotion died down it struck Ranma as as good a time as any to ask what was going on.

“So, Chardin-san-”

“Quiet!” the woman chided. “One must focus on the food when eating. No conversation.”

Ranma glared at the section of centrepiece she assumed was hiding the woman, but her empty stomach silenced further protest. Careful to keep a pace similar enough to the three Tendo sisters, knowing that her usual table manners weren’t appropriate for as fancy a location as this, Ranma found herself still hungry when cruel woman clapped again to cause servants to begin clearing the table. Ranma tried desperately to grab a few more bites as her plate was being taken away (luckily
the Tendo girls were distracted by confusion over their own food being taken away so soon and missed Ranma’s poor table manners).

In the flurry the centre-piece itself was removed, and suddenly the four girls found themselves under the steely glare of the brown haired woman.

“I trust your fath’rs explained our arrangement, mademoiselles?” she asked.

Ranma turned to the Tendo sisters, not surprised to have never heard anything from her father. She was slightly surprised to see the three of them look just confused.

“I’m sorry, but he has not,” Akane replied, before glancing at Ranma.

“Pops never explains anythin’.”

“Ah, what a shame,” Chardin sighed, leaning back into his chair and running a hand through his hair. “Well, to put it simply, many years ago the two men came upon the ancestral Chardin family restaurant. Both men ate their way through a good chunk of our supplies that day... and then they turned out their empty pockets when my father asked for payment.”

Ranma rolled her eyes, unsurprised to hear that. Akane and Kasumi made sounds of surprise, but Ranma sensed that the middle sister was as unsurprised as she herself was.

“Both men accepted the Chardin family’s offer for alternative payment,” the woman added. (Ranma knew before she said it what type of payment her father offered.) “They agreed that between the two of them they would provide a bride for young master Picolet.”

The blond lad smiled a smile that was a little too large for a normal human face.

“It is quite an honour to marry into the Chardin family,” the woman explained. “The Chardins are masters of Martial Arts Dining, and have been since the days of L’Anciens Regime before we were forced to leave our mother France.”

“If you’re such an esteemed family, then why exactly are you demanding brides as dinner payments?” Nabiki asked. “Shouldn’t you be having to turn would be wives away?”

“There are those who find the... physique of our family off putting. I cannot fathom why,” Picolet replied, before stretching his mouth open wide enough to swallow a whole turkey.

The looks of disgust on three of the four potential brides faces were absolute. Akane and Nabiki struggled to keep their lunches down while Ranma audibly gagged.

“Oh my,” Kasumi replied, a look of mild discomfort all that graced her face.

“There’s gotta be a way outta this!” Ranma shouted, leaping to her feet and knocking her chair over.

“Honhon, well, if madame were to somehow manage to outperform Picolet in a martial arts dining competition then perhaps one might let her go free... but our family has been undefeated for three centuries,” the governess of a woman replied, laughing merrily.

“An’ what’s involved? Eatin’ fast? I can do that! If pops has trained me ta do anythin’ it’s that,” Ranma boasted. Looking over at the three girls who were watching her with concern she gave them a cocky smile. “Don’t worry. I got this.”

“Such plucky confidence, and in so lovely a form,” Picolet said, giving that unsettling oversized
smile. “But it simply will not do to have a wife who disrespects the Chardin family. Ah, a display!”

“Oh yes, how clever Picolet,” the woman replied, clapping her hands.

Once more the table was covered in food.

“But we just ate,” Nabiki muttered, disgust clear in her voice.

“Trois, Deux, Un, Zero,” the woman counted.

Picolet’s plates were clean before anyone could blink, and the French heir was gingerly dabbing his lips with a handkerchief. “As you see, Mademoiselle Saotome, the Chardin family are masters of our art.”

The three Tendo sisters looked over to see Ranma gritting her teeth and staring forward with unwavering determination.

“She’s in over her head... but at least it’s not my neck,” Nabiki whispered just loud enough for her sisters to hear.

Akane shook her head and turned to Nabiki. “Don’t be so sure. You didn’t see her at the festival. If anyone can manage this, it’s her.”

* * *

Genma was asleep. It had been a late night with Soun, venting his every trial. How he’d finally gotten the boy to be something approaching a man to make Nodoka happy. And then Jusenkyo happened. And then the engagement to Hibari. And then Ranma’s sudden declaration of girlhood.

Okay, it was honestly a late morning by the time Genma had returned to the Oozora compound, stumbling drunkenly. The younger residents had already left for school when he’d arrived. Hastily closed curtains had rendered his small bedroom in amongst the upper Oozora goons just dark enough for him to sleep despite the sun. With any luck he wouldn’t wake up until the next morning.

Hibari bursting into the room at some time in the mid afternoon did little to disturb him. Even as she shook him violently and shouted at him. Genma had slept through worse.

One might expect the blonde storming off to be the end of that interruption, but she returned a few minutes later. Only this time she was carrying a shotgun. Pointing it at the floor nerve-wrackingly close to Genma’s sleeping form she fired.

The bang jolted Genma upright as he lept into a fighting stance... only to double over due to the hangover induced throbbing pain in his head.

“Oh good, you’re awake,” Hibari said, her tone casual as if she’d walked in to find him alert.

Genma glared at the blonde, struggling to ignore the pain in his head. “What do you want, weirdo?”

“Oh yeah, very creative Panda-san... Listen, Ranma, your child, was invited to a dinner by some weird French guy. I think the name Chardin was mentioned?”

“Not so loud,” Genma grumbled. “But, hmm... Chardin... sounds sort of familiar. Tendo would know more.”

“That’s it?” Hibari asked, pointing a finger accusatively in Genma’s face. “Nothing else?”
“Dunn’t point that finger at me unless ya plan to use it,” Genma slurred as he teetered back towards unconsciousness. Snoring followed soon after.

Hibari narrowed her eyes and stared at him a few moments before turning to find Seiji. The big innocent thug was busy scrambling about like they were under attack or something.

“What’s up, Seiji?” Hibari asked, jogging alongside him.

“One of the juniors heard gunfire. We’re trying to figure out what’s going on, young miss,” Seiji replied.

“Pfft! Nah, that was just me waking up Uncle Panda,” Hibari said, laughing. “I put the shotgun back in the armoury, don’t worry.”

“Ah, phew. Please don’t do that without telling anyone, young miss,” Seiji replied.

“Sure... Anyway, do you know anything about where that Tendo guy lives. You know, the one that Uncle Genma likes to visit?”

Seiji paused to think it over for a few moments. “Oh yeah. He actually lives pretty close to that Dr. Tofu’s clinic.”

“Thank you,” Hibari replied with a quick bow. “Tell Tsugumi I might be late for dinner.”

* * *

The car ride home had been awkward for the Tendos. Akane and Kasumi were deeply worried about the girl they’d left behind. Nabiki was more focused on trying to get the disturbing image of Chardin’s fully extended maw out of her head.

The girls were less than impressed to come home and find their father passed out in the family room, though at least he’d finally come home. Once Kasumi had pulled him into his bed the three girls gathered in the kitchen. Akane and Nabiki sat at the table while Kasumi began cleaning to distract herself.

“So, Nabiki... do you have any idea where we could find the Oozora family Ran said she was staying with?” Akane asked.

“I’m not sure. The name sounds familiar, but I can’t place it right now,” the girl with the sharp pageboy haircut replied.

“It does seem a good priority. They would no doubt be worried about her,” Kasumi mentioned as she began to scrub an almost certainly spotless pot.

“I wish we had a more direct way to help her,” Akane muttered, staring down at the table.

“Speaking of help, where’s Sakamoto. You’d think he’d have helped daddy to the right room when he got home,” Nabiki grumbled, as if she’d been the one to drag him to his bed.

“He said he was doing something with Daisuke today,” Akane replied. “After all the fuss he made about wanting me to train him, he skips out on the second day.”

“Well, Akane, you did dislocate his shoulder with those grapples,” Kasumi said.

“Yeah, way to send mixed signals little sis. Do grapples to get lots of close contact, but then break the guy. I can only imagine what a terror you be when you finally bring a boy to your bedroom,”
Nabiki added, laughing to herself.

“I just don’t get to practice grapples with the idiots at school so-” Akane’s defense was interrupted by knocking at the door.

“Who could that be?” Akane asked.

“How should I know?” Nabiki replied, standing up. “Let’s find out.”

Akane shrugged and followed her sister. Reaching the front door Nabiki pulled it open to find a blonde girl pacing back and forth nervously. At the sign of life she lit up with a smile.

“Oh! You’re Ran’s friend. I remember you,” Akane said. “You’re quick. We were trying to figure out how we’d track you down.”

Nabiki raised an eyebrow, waiting for an introduction.

“Thank goodness you were expecting me. That makes my questions easier,” Hibari replied. She wondered about the cold appraising eyes the brunette had. That girl seemed like quality yakuza material.

“There’s a bit to explain, but Ran is with the Chardins still,” Akane said. “It would be better if you came in to sit down.”

“Are you sure? I... I haven’t even introduced myself properly. Oozora Hibari,” the blonde said with a slight bow.

“Tendo Nabiki,” the shorter haired Tendo replied.

Akane led them back to the kitchen, where Kasumi had begun cooking something.

Akane gave a quick introduction for her eldest sister before she and Nabiki explained what had happened. The marriage promise, the unsettling Chardin mouth, the speed Ran was going to need, and how Ran had agreed to stay. By the end of it Hibari was resting her forehead in her hand.

“How many marriage promises did that man make,” Hibari muttered.

“If you don’t mind me asking, why is Ran staying with your family?” Nabiki asked, despite a nasty look from Akane for intruding at time like this.

“Oh, er, well Ranma and I...” Hibari froze, realising things were a lot more complicated with the Tendos only knowing Ranma as a girl.

“Ah. So you’re Ranma’s fiancée? I remember daddy and his friend mentioning an engagement. Where is he anyway, shouldn’t he be here looking for his sister too?” Nabiki said.

Hibari blinked, processing. Of course. They didn’t know about the curse, so any mutterings about a son they’d heard when Genma was over would be assumed to be a separate person from the girl they met. But if Hibari had to explain the curse... they’d probably not believe it without a display, and... maybe this could provide an option for Ranma to get to practice being a girl before making the big announcement. As she thought it through she realised Nabiki was getting a bit impatient.

“I, well... Ranma’s following other leads. Genma was very vague,” Hibari said, hoping the lie seemed believable.

Akane nodded and clearly bought it, though Nabiki’s cold eyes seemed less convinced.
“So, what are you going to do?” Akane asked.

“I... well, I suppose I can try to bust her out. Then again she is a Saotome... they get pretty stubborn about facing any challenge. Still, I need to at least offer to help,” Hibari replied.

“Oh my, do be careful,” Kasumi said from over at the kitchen counter.

Hibari smiled. “Of course. And thank you again for the information.”

“It’s no worry,” Akane said, cutting offer Nabiki (who no doubt hoped to draw some cold hard cash). “We’re in debt to Ran. If she hadn’t taken the engagement... one of us would be stuck.”

“Mhm... I think we’re going to have a long conversation with daddy to make sure he doesn’t have any other engagement schemes,” Nabiki added, crossing her arms and glaring in the direction of her father’s room.

* * *

Ranma fussed with the iron corset that felt welded to her body. She’d finally been able to take off the gaudy layers of clothing that Madame St. Paul had shoved her into now that she was alone, though the underwear they’d left her with was probably better described as lingerie.

As she gradually gave up the idea of cracking the lock Ranma fell onto the bed provided. It was soft. Way too soft in her opinion. She’d never get to sleep.

The sound of her stomach grumbling provided an unwanted reminder of how brutal the bridal training she was going through was. Involuntarily her mind began to wander to thoughts of various dishes she’d love right now.

Ranma was so lost in thoughts of ice cream and eclairs the sound of the window opening caused Ranma to jump. The sight of her favourite blonde hopping in, clad in a black leather motorcycle jacket and matching pants, caused the petite genderbender to light up with a smile. Having the blonde rush over and wrap her in a tight hug was also nice, now that Ranma had begun to grow more comfortable with physical contact.

“Hibari! It’s good to see ya! Did ya bring food?” Ranma asked.

“Food? The Tendos made it seem like all you would be doing was eating,” Hibari replied, looking down at the shorter girl in confusion as she took Ranma’s hands in her own.

“Hah, not a chance. They’re tryin’ ta teach me to eat the way they do. Except I don’t have a freaky long tongue like a...a frog or somethin’,” the redhead muttered. “I gotta use my hands ta eat. Like a normal person. An’ that’s against the rules here.”

Hibari tried not to feel too disgusted by the descriptions she’d gotten about these Chardins, but she began to seriously wonder if they were really human. “Well, don’t worry. I’m here to bust you out.”

“What? Ya can’t do that!” Ranma protested, pleading eyes meeting Hibari’s own. “If I run off... they might kidnap one a the Tendo girls. And plus, I gave my word I’d take on their challenge. I ain’t gonna back out just ‘cause it’s tough.”

Hibari let out a sigh and sat down onto the bed. “I figured you’d say something like that, but I had to offer...”

“I appreciate it, I really do. But I’ve got my reputation ta think about.”
Hibari nodded, before giving Ranma a once over. A mischievous smile grew on her cute blonde face. “At least the underwear is cute. I wonder if they’ll let you keep it when you get out.”

Ranma quickly turned beet red. “I don’t know how you manage ta think about stuff like that at a time like this,” the buxom redhead said, before sliding into a guilty whisper. “They are comfy though... I might pocket a pair either way. Not the corset though, this thing is hell.”

“That’s the spirit,” Hibari replied with a laugh. “Do you have any idea how long they’re going to give you to train?”

Ranma shrugged. “A few weeks, maybe? There was a lotta French.”

Hibari thought it over, quickly realising something. “Exams are next week... I’ll have to talk to the chairmen to see if I can get you extensions. I’ll be back tomorrow, and I’m going to try to visit you every day I can, but... I really do need to get heading home. Tsugumi will be getting worried.”

“Thanks,” Ranma replied, smiling up at her. “And please... bring food next time.”
Leeches and Toads

Chapter Notes

Sorry for the Happosai.

Also, my ongoing thanks to RDavidson/Inklesspen and everyone else at the Ranma Discord for their input.

Hibari sighed as she walked past the door to Ranma’s room. It had been a week and her fiancée had been taken away by the Chardins. She’d visited Ranma almost every night since, but had missed tonight and it was lonely without the little redhead. (And Ranma’s cute male form too... Hibari wasn’t too proud to admit she missed that view too.)

Well, maybe tomorrow she’d get better news. For now she just planned to head to bed. Today just hadn’t been her day. Her chopsticks didn’t break right at lunch. Her motorcycle had failed to start (the reason she missed seeing Ranma tonight). It had just generally been a string of ill results.

As she opened the door to her room she was greeted to a rather unusual sight. Her clothing was scattered everywhere, and a small creature-no, person(?) was rifling through her underwear drawer, muttering something about fishing.

Slinking over silently she pulled the emergency uzi she kept hidden behind her stereo out and swung it around to point at this small shrivelled being.

“Freeze!” she ordered as she unhitched the safety.

“Cheese? I love pictu-” the tiny man began as he turned to give her a peace sign. Apparently he had mistaken the click of the safety for that of a camera. “Woah there, girly. Let’s not point firearms at an innocent old man!”

“You have until the count of three to step away from my underwear.”

“You’re quite unladylike, little-”

“One.”

“You should respect your eld-”

“Two.”

“You’re getting on my temper mi-”

The shrivelled man’s reply was muffled by the sound of Hibari opening fire. The tiny pervert moved quickly, but her micro uzi’s rate of fire proved enough to force him on the run. In her outrage Hibari paid little attention to the damage she was doing to her room as she tried to hit the creep.

Unfortunately her magazine was soon exhausted. As she paused to reload the shrivelled creep propelled forward, the look in his eyes implying an intent to grope. Hibari managed to dodge his effort to latch on, but he still had a chance to grab for a moment.
Needless to say Hibari was feeling about the angriest she’d felt in her life. Shaking with rage she struggled to insert the new magazine.

Luckily Happosai was frozen in thought, staring at his hands. After a moment of shock he muttered a single word: “Fake.”

“And that’s the only reason I’m not calling in help to make this more painful for you,” Hibari seethed, having finally reloaded and now pointing the barrel of her uzi at him.

Happosai turned to look her over, and as he did so the energy in the room seemed to shift. Hibari was able to recognise it as the old creep’s aura, and struggled to keep her weapon pointed at him.

“You’ve got a good passion for the finer things in life, but you’ve gone a little too far... boy,” Happosai declared after a moment.

Hibari’s eye twitched and, despite Happosai’s battle aura, she found the courage to pull the trigger. Unfortunately she’d unconsciously ended up aiming at where the head of his battle aura projected, not Happosai’s true head, and the diminutive pervert leapt out the window (with his sack of stolen goods) before she could correct.

As the threat vanished into the night Hibari’s adrenaline levels finally fell. This was followed by her dropping to her knees, staring into space. Whatever it was that just happened felt surreal, but also left her feeling violated to her core.

It took her a moment to notice that Tsugumi had arrived and pulled her into a warm maternal hug. Once the sensation broke through her state of shock Hibari grasped ahold of her older sister and began to cry into Tsugumi’s shoulder.

“It’s okay, Hibari. Just tell me what happened,” Tsugumi said softly.

“There was this little creepy old man... he was going through my underwear, stealing all of it... and I tried to stop him, but...” the blonde muttered into her sisters shoulder.

A frazzled looking Tsubame rushed along from the hallway, glancing back over her shoulder as she moved (as if convinced whatever she saw would vanish if she took her eyes off it).

“My room is a total mess! My clothes are everywhere and-wait, what happened here?” the brunette asked as she took in the damage done to Hibari’s room.

“He had to have been a top class martial artist,” Hibari muttered. “The way he moved... It was superhuman. I tried to stop him...”

“With what? An uzi?” Tsubame replied sarcastically, before noticing there was indeed an uzi lying on the floor. “Oh... you take your security seriously.”

“Well, come on, Hibari. Tonight you can sleep in my room, and then tomorrow we’ll work on getting you new furniture,” Tsugumi offered, helping her sister back to her feet.

* * *

Ranma’s stomach gurgled as she lay in bed. Hibari hadn’t show up yet... probably had to start studying for exams. Ranma felt an odd twinge of regret at being here, dealing with martial arts and family honour rather than studying with Hibari. Had she actually grown to like school? Or was it just the proximity to Hibari as they worked quietly together that she liked?
Well, part of it was probably her seeing school as a challenge rather than an obstacle now. Which meant she had to accept and conquer it the best she could.

But for now she just had her hunger to worry about.

Knocking at her window warmed Ranma’s heart, and the redhead rushed over to open the window. However it was not Hibari waiting outside, but Ukyo. The brunette was clad in her usual gakuran, battle spatula in tow.

“Hey Ranchan,” she said as she hopped into the bedroom. “Phew, this place is fancy.”

“Hi Ucchan. Is Hibari with you?”

“No. I’d have figured she’d already have visited. I grabbed a train and roofhopped from the station.”

Ranma nodded. “That’s a lot of effort. Thanks for comin’ all this way.”

Ukyo smiled and put a hand on Ranma’s shoulder, taking in the lingerie look of the shorter girl’s clothes and blushing slightly. “Of course I came out here. You’re my fiancée. I would have come sooner, but business was slow and I couldn’t close shop early without risking failing to reach rent... but I’m here now.”

Ukyo was surprised to find Ranma suddenly hug her. “I missed you, Ucchan.”

Ukyo felt a brief moment of bliss, before remembering something. “You know, there’s something you’ve given your other fiancées that you still owe me.”

“What’s that?” Ranma asked nervously, taking a step back.

Ukyo leaned forward and place a hand under Ranma’s chin. “A kiss.”

As Ukyo’s lips made contact with Ranma’s the shorter girl nearly pulled away, but instead gave into the sensation, returning the kiss. Ukyo was definitely a good kisser. Better than Shampoo (who’s main tool was cuteness rather than skill), and definitely better than Sanzenin (actually seeing the other person in the kiss as, well, a person).

As Ukyo broke away Ranma was left with an idea. Sure, Shui hadn’t been real, but maybe that idea of adding a third person to the romance could still work. Ukyo and Hibari did get along, after all.

“Now then, tell me what exactly’s going on, Ranchan. Since I am in the food martial artists’ business myself, maybe I can provide a few tips.”

Suzume was hurrying to school the next morning when she saw a tiny old man looking over a map. He was shorter than she was, and generally seemed to fit the mosquito faced description Hibari had given of the thief last night. As such Suzume decided to march past him.

“Little girl, would you mind helping an old man out?” Happosai asked, hurrying after her.

“I’m busy. Try asking someone else,” the little bluenette replied curtly, increasing her pace.

“I may have been away from Tokyo for a while, but that is certainly no way to treat your elders,” Happosai said, trying to sound stern while keeping his anger in check.
“I don’t know you. If you keep following me... this is your last warning,” Suzume countered, shooting the man an angry look.

“Now see here! A young girl like you should show resp-”

“HELP! I don’t know you! Get away! I won’t follow you to YOUR VAN! Don’t touch me!” Suzume shouted, begin to run through the safety lessons Tsugumi and Hibari had both given her.

Every head on the street turned to see what was happening, along with many heads poking out of windows and over fences.

“You’re lucky you’re a child, otherwise I would teach you a lesson,” Happosai hissed, before bounding off across the city.

To think, he’d only planned to ask the girl for directions. What had happened to the youth while he was in that cave? Hopefully Genma and Soun’s children would be reliable.

* * *

Ranma groaned in pain as while sitting under the cold water of a shower. The desire to return to being male had been growing stronger the last few days. The pigtailed cutie couldn’t understand why, but had tried to act on the desire.

Only to have internal organs crushed by the iron corset that came with Chardin bridal training.

At least the hunger pains were no longer front and center in Ranma’s mind.

* * *

“Y-yakuza? Really?” Akane asked her sister as she watched Nabiki pocket the 1000 yen bill she’d just handed over.

The pair were standing on the roof of Furinkan, away from the lunch hour chaos below. Akane shivered despite the late July heat.

“I don’t lie to a client who’s paid full price,” Nabiki replied casually. “I looked through my records to see why I’d recognised the name Oozora. They’re the head Yakuza group in Western Nerima and Suginami. It seems daddy’s friend got himself tied up in something quite messy.”

“She seemed so nice though... I suppose I should still go thank them. D-do you have an address?”

“One better,” Nabiki declared confidently. “After some effort I procured their telephone number. So you can send you thanks without risking your neck. Or wasting bus fare.”

(Nabiki’s extensive searching had in fact merely involved looking through a phone book, but it was better to give the impression matters had been more difficult than reality.)

* * *

When Akane got home she rushed straight to the phone. She noticed that some furniture had been moved into the kitchen, and vaguely wondered if Kasumi was doing some cleaning.

She’d ask after the phone call.

When someone finally answered Akane was overjoyed to hear a girl whose voice felt like that of a highschooler. “Hello, Oozora family residence. Who’s calling?”
“Akane, er, Tendo Akane. I was hoping to speak to Hibari?”

“Oh... you want the pervert,” the girl on the replied before calling out. “Hey! Hibari, you’ve got a call. Some girl.”

“Did you call me a pervert, sis?” Hibari’s voice shouted in the background.

“Only because it’s true,” the other girl yelled back.

“Ugh. Just give me the phone, Tsubame,” Hibari replied. Akane her the rumbling noises of the receiver switching hands. “Hello, Oozora Hibari speaking.”

“Hi!” Akane replied, wondering just why Hibari’s sister was calling her a pervert. She was starting to wonder about this whole idea...

The phone was quiet for a bit, until Hibari realised there wasn’t anything else coming her way. “Um, who is this?”

“Oh! Right, your sister didn’t say. It’s Akane. I’m just phoning because me and Kasumi were talking and, well, we figured we need to do something nice for you and the Saotomes since we kind of owe you for helping us with this mess. We were thinking of maybe inviting you over for dinner? W-when Ran is free of this mess too, of course,” Akane rambled, trying her best to stay calm.

“Thank you,” Hibari replied, a bit surprised that such a big deal was being made out of all this. “Hey, did you want to sneak over to the Chardin’s with me tonight to pay Ran a visit?”

“Uh, sure.”


“Bye,” Akane replied, before hanging up.

Akane was smiling as she walked towards the family room. She was going to get to properly thank Ran. As well as get to know her and Hibari. It would be nice to have other girls around who wanted to talk martial arts.

Reaching the family room her smile vanished as she was greeted to the sight of her father crying as a tiny old man sat jovially drinking saké across the table from him.

“Oh, I didn’t know we had a guest.”

“A-Akane... yes. I... this is my old master, he taught Saotome and I everything w-we know about martial arts,” Soun stammered between sobs.

The old man put his drink down and gave Akane a once over. “Akane-chan!”

The shrivelled man leapt towards her with alarming speed, grabbing ahold of her front. Screaming Akane began her best efforts to beat his skull in. Eventually he dislodged, yet seemed none the worse for wear.

“The girl’s got pep. Too bad... wasted with her delicate feminine nature,” Happosai declared.

“I’ll show you delicate!” Akane roared, as she smashed the tv stand into the place he’d been standing.

“Tsk, tsk. I thought you would have trained her to respect a grandmaster more, Soun,” the letch
replied from across the room.

“What’s going on?” Kousaku asked as he rushed to find the reason for Akane’s scream.

Happosai bounded up to him, before leaping onto his shoulder to poke and prod Kousaku’s face.

“I don’t remember you having a son, Soun. Doesn’t look much like you either.”

Sobbing worse than ever Soun was a broken man. The master had returned, and his daughters were old enough to interest him. “Th-that’s Sakamoto K-Kousaku. H-he’s Harue’s boy. She passed away recently, so I took him in.”

Happosai seemed to show a brief moment of honest mourning. “A shame. She was a beautiful woman, and the world is an uglier place for her absence. But you look durable enough, Sakamoto-kun. No Kappei, but I think I’ll train you up as if you were Soun’s own.”

“Kappei? Wait... the anime character Sakamoto Kappei?” Kousaku asked.

Akane shivered. “I hate that show...”

“Come on my boy, I’m going to run you through some basic testing!” Happosai declared, dragging Kousaku off to the dojo.

Once he was firmly out of earshot Nabiki and Kasumi’s faces popped around the door frame.

“That was your master, daddy? He’s a total creep,” Nabiki said flatly.

“Let’s not anger him. His wrath is a terrifying thing,” Soun replied, staring off into empty space.

“Well, what shall we do with the furniture he moved?” Kasumi asked.

“Storage I suppose,” Soun sighed.

Akane’s indignations were briefly cut off by the sound of Kousaku screaming.

“The Master’s methods are harsh,” Soun muttered.

* * *

The Tendo dinner table was very awkward that night. All three girls sat staring at the shrivelled old man devouring half their kitchen (though Kasumi managed to be subtle about it). Soun simply continued to exist in a state of shock. Kousaku meanwhile was exhausted and kept dropping the same piece of broccoli.

Eventually Akane couldn’t take it anymore. The man was a slime, a pervert, and clearly planning to eat them out of house and home. Still, her father had warned of Happosai’s wrath, so she’d try to stay polite.

“So, Happosai-sensei... as a grandmaster, you wouldn’t happen to know anything about the Chardin Family or Martial Arts Dining, would you?” she asked. Hoping to see if he could actually prove useful.

The old man paused his gorging to blink in thought. “Ho-oh, yes! I remember. It should be under ‘J’ for ‘Josephine’... I found out she was Swiss later, but man... what a set of legs...”

“Under J? Where?” Akane asked, turning to her sisters.
“Master Happosai did bring many scrolls with him,” Kasumi replied. “Grandfather Happosai, would it be okay if we looked for information?”

“Sure, sure,” he muttered, apparently lost in thoughts of Josephine.

The three girls snuck off, Akane taking a moment to confirm that Kousaku had at last managed to get that bit of broccoli. He was now struggling with a bit of cod.

Reaching the room Happosai had claimed the sisters found it in chaos. Women’s underwear was strewn about. Scrolls simply sat in piles. Nabiki found her eye twitching at the poor bookkeeping (while Akane’s twitched at the perversion).

“This might take a while,” Nabiki stated flatly as she started poking through texts.

* * *

Mousse had to admit that being held prisoner was a lot more boring than he’d ever realised. The only events in his day were when Shampoo came to bring him food. In cursed form every time.

He was fairly certain she was staggering his meals to keep him confused, but with no way to tell what time it was he couldn’t say for sure. Sighing he ran his hand along his rough buzzcut, only to freeze halfway.

«That was Shampoo,» he muttered aloud. «Oh gods... I cut her hair. And she shaved me clean...»

Mousse collapsed against the wall. He may have been unsettled by Shampoo’s new curse, but he’d still hoped he could somehow talk her into returning home and finding a cure. Having cut her hair in battle though... she had to hate him. Well, she had shaved him in response, and that was generally the ultimate insult a warrior of the Niujiezu.

His entire life’s goal was lost now.

* * *

“Found it!” Nabiki announced happily as she pulled a book out from a pile of various tomes.

Akane hurried over to read with her. (Kasumi had been drawn away by the need to clean up after dinner.) The two felt various stages of disgust as they flipped through the book’s illustrations of various inhuman looking practitioners of this foreign art. Until they came to one one named ‘Monsieur Petite Bouche’.

“He actually looks human,” Akane whispered. “Was he any good?”

Nabiki kept reading a bit farther to find out, not wanting to give her hopes any time to rise under false hope.

“He was,” she whispered. “Through something called the Parlay du foie gras.”

The sisters read along excitedly. There were warnings about it being a dangerous and unorthodox technique. And then... the next page was illegible, covered in crudely drawn, well, crude drawings of women. As well as what was almost certainly meant as a self portrait of Happosai, but with long flowing hair.

Akane felt her eye twitch once again, while Nabiki struggled to try and read despite the doodles. Unfortunately this proved effectively useless as the words she could make out were ambiguous at
“Well, it’s a start at least,” Akane sighed.

The sound of honking at the front door provided a welcome distraction, and Akane hurried out to see who was there. She found Hibari waiting patiently on a motorcycle, with a second helmet in her hand.

“Hey there,” Hibari said happily as she waved. “You look a little tired. Are you sure you’re up for the ride?”

“Anything to get out of the house right now,” Akane replied, before walking up to whispering range of Hibari. “Daddy’s old master is staying with us, and... he’s one of the most unpleasant people I’ve ever met.”

“I’m sorry to hear that,” Hibari said, before handing Akane her helmet. “Well, hop on and hold tight.”

Akane quickly pulled the helmet on before doing as instructed. The sudden burst of speed was exhilarating. As they whipped along the streets of Nerima Akane found herself wishing she had a motorcycle herself. It would probably be pricey, but bring Nabiki along to get a used one and she might be able to afford it.

“Is it hard to get a licence?” Akane shouted.

“Wha?-Oh! No idea!” Hibari replied, while weaving her way onto the Kan-Etsu expressway.

“Pardon!”

Akane felt the taller girl shrug. “Licences are just a bit of legal paper. Never really bothered trying to get one.”

Hibari felt Akane’s grip tighten to a vice-like force, and began to find it difficult to breath (let lone steer.)

“You don’t have a licence!”

“I-I know how to drive,” Hibari replied, gasping a bit. “Relax.”

Akane’s grip loosened slightly, but remained impressive. The raven haired girl stayed quiet for a while, trying to lose herself in the experience. She had always liked when her father would rent a car to take the family on vacation. This felt a little scarier, exposed as she was, but also more exciting for the risk factor.

“Wait a second. This is a toll road. Don’t they check for licences?” Akane asked.

“Don’t worry. My dad knows some of the guys who run this. I get a free pass,” Hibari replied. “It’s not too long either. We just need to get a little past the Musashino Line, and then we’re off the highway for like... 10 minutes at the most.”

* * *

Sneaking past the Chardin family servants had been fun, in Akane’s humble opinion. Noticing how blasé Hibari seemed about this Akane had to wonder how normal a thing this was for the blonde. And found herself hoping that she could have more adventures if she hung out with Ran and Hibari
They at last reached the door to Ran’s room, and found the petite girl looking a bit thinner. Despite that Ran seemed as filled with energy as Akane remembered, eyes sparkling brightly

“Hibari! It’s good to see you. I was worried when you didn’t come by yesterday,” the redhead said, almost overflowing with words. “Oh! You brought Akane. Hey there.”

“Hello,” Akane replied, feeling slightly worried that Ran seemed almost disappointed she was there. “I-I tried to find some information that might help you, though all I could manage was a name. ‘Parlay du foie gras’. Apparently, whatever it is, the technique lets someone with a normal mouth defeat folks like the Chardins.”

“Well, that’s a start. Thanks Akane,” Ran replied, smiling warmly and helping Akane to feel welcome.

“I remember Tsugumi saying something about foie gras one time... I think she didn’t like it because they mistreat the ducks... or was it geese,” Hibari said, half mumbling as she tried to remember the facts.

“Tsugumi?” Akane asked.

“Her big sis,” Ran explained. “Knows loads about cookin’.”

Akane nodded. That was standard eldest sister knowledge, wasn’t it?

“I’ll try askin’ the Chardin’s about it,” Ran said. “Hibari, you can try askin’ Tsugumi. And, Akane, thanks again for helpin’ out like this. Ya don’t have ta.”

“Don’t be silly. My sisters and I owe you big time. And... well, I can’t hang out and make friends with you two if one of you is locked away in here,” Akane told the shorter girl confidently.

“There is one thing I want to ask,” Hibari said. “I’ve been looking through the rules of Martial Arts Dining, and apparently it’s points based? Which means they need a judge... Any idea who’ll be judging?”

Ran shrugged. “I got the impression it would be that St. Paul lady.”

“Really? That hardly seems fair,” Hibari replied, growing a bit lost in thought.

* * *

Ryoga was leaning against a tree, enjoying the cool morning air as he vented over his worries.

“So you see, the girl I fell for ended up really being a boy. I don’t know what to do. My heart continues to thump nervously whenever I think about Hibari, but... Ugh, should I just accept being gay?”

“Mmmrooooo?”

Ryoga nodded. This cow was the best conversation partner he’d found in weeks, he was sure of it. “Mhm, that’s a good point. If I only date Hibari while he’s in girl mode... it’s barely gay. It might even be a way out of all this.”

“Mmrooo.”
“Thanks. It was good talking to you. I, er... I really hope this is a dairy farm,” Ryoga replied, his smile vanishing for a bit. “Well, I have to get going, but I hope to see you around.”

Ryoga stood up and patted some dust off his pants. He then looked around to study the countryside and try to get his bearings. Those rolling hills with all the pines... and the snow still on the mountains in the distance... Had to be frigid Shikoku.

“Hmm, if I remember correctly, Tokyo is about 700 km west of here,” he announced, before turning due south and heading off.

By some miracle he was actually headed in the right direction for once. (But who knew how long that would last?)
Exams were finished. School was out for the next month. And Hibari was staring at her ceiling while her stereo played some *Ippu-Do*. It wasn’t like she had anything better to do right now, with Ranma still absent. At least Ranma had figured out the *Parlay* and was expecting to drop the challenge against Chardin any day now.

But Hibari couldn’t do anything. She really didn’t like feeling powerless.

“Miss Hibari,” Seiji’s gruff voice called out from the doorway.

“Yeah? What’s up Seiji?”

“There’s a man here to see you. He says it’s important.”

Hibari sighed as she pulled herself out of bed. “Alright. Do you know who he is?”

“He said he is Shampoo’s father.”

Hibari stopped on the threshold between her bedroom (which had been repaired of all bullet holes) and the hallway, and turned around to head back to bed.

“Y-young miss! He was very apologetic. He says he wants to explain things,” Seiji added desperately. He knew Hibari could be a bit stubborn at times.

Hibari stopped and let out a sigh. “Well... I didn’t really have any other plans. Alright. Let’s see what he has to say.”

Hibari followed Seiji down to one of the side buildings of the complex. It was a smaller one room building. Nearly a shed really. It was generally used for intimidation or interrogation. She found Shampoo’s father seated beside the short *chabudai* table. The man looked quite forlorn.

Hibari sat herself across from him, while Seiji sat to one side. He had checked the man for weapons, but after stories about what Mousse could smuggle about he wasn’t going to leave this man alone with Hibari.

The man took a moment to compose himself before bowing to Hibari. “I wish to apologise for the trouble my family has caused you. And yet, I must also beg you aid.”

“Really? And why should we help?” Hibari asked.

The man sat back up, but kept his eyes on the table between them. “My daughter... she’s been acting withdrawn these past couple of weeks. She’s normal such a cheerful girl, and yet now she barely eats and almost never leaves her room... you and Saotome are the only people here she’s ever considered her friends. Perhaps the only ones she’s ever truly considered friends.”

“That friendship was based entirely on a lie,” Hibari countered flatly. She didn’t like that it took a bit of effort to maintain her flat tone. She had considered *Shui* a friend, and knowing that Shui had been Shampoo... well, it confused her sympathy a little.

“I know... It was my grandmother’s idea. Shampoo had wanted to tell you both right away. She hoped it would be a dramatic enough show of her love to win you two... but my grandmother has grown perhaps a bit too fond of intrigue in her old age and wanted to try two strategies at once.”
“Shampoo also tried to kill both Ranma and me,” Hibari added, as much to convince herself as anything.

“I believe it is custom within your family’s circles to remove fingers from those who fail to repay debts and give apologies. A tradition started to weaken warriors who had offended. There are many in my village who would consider that an unspeakable punishment,” the man said softly.

Hibari felt herself struggling to justify herself in the matter, trying to distance traditions in her ‘culture’ from those in Shampoo’s. Yet to her surprise the man did not push that accusation, and instead produced a cloth, onto which he placed his hand.

“I couldn’t bring a knife in this situation, but... I am prepared to submit to your traditions if that is the apology you need.”

“Woah! Woah! No! No chopping off fingers!” Hibari shouted, both to Shampoo’s father and to Seiji (who had been headed towards the door, no doubt to call Sabu over to perform the yubitsume). “I’ll go talk to Shampoo, and no one will lose any body parts. Sound good?”

Shampoo’s father breathed a sigh of relief. “That’s certainly a better option in my books.”

* * *

Entering by the service door to the Neko Hanten, Hibari and Brush (which is what Hibari had learned was the name of Shampoo’s father) were surprised to see a happy looking male form Shampoo pulling food out from a refrigerator. Hibari shot a glance at Brush, and found him looking utterly baffled.

“Tongzhi Hibari! Was just about to go visit. Have good news!” Shampoo announced.

“Good news?” Hibari asked, quite confused.

Shampoo nodded happily. “Was studying Cologne’s texts. Learned how to do Cat’s Tongue. Now tongzhi Hibari and Ranma not need to worry. Am just Shui now.”

“W-what?” Hibari stuttered.

“Tongzhi not like Shampoo, but are friends with Shui. So... if make no Shampoo, only Shui, then we all good. Yes?”

Brush rushed forward to the dining area, and began shouting in Mandarin. A raspy and ancient voice shouted back. Moments later Cologne hopped into the kitchen and bounded over to Shui.

“You used the Cat’s Tongue on yourself? Why, Shampoo?” the old woman asked, her usual confidence giving way to genuine concern and compassion.

“Am Shui now. Give up old life if that is what future spouses need.”

“Shampoo, don’t do that to yourself,” Hibari said, moving forward. “You can’t... we might have been upset, but this...”

“Is already done,” Shui replied flatly.

Hibari felt her heart drop, and did the only thing she could do: grab Shui into a hug. “No, no, no... We’ll fix this.”

“You say this bad and must be fixed, but also hug Shui while have only ever hated Shampoo,” Shui
replied.

Hibari let go and backed away a step. “Shampoo, you did sort of give a bad first impression, but let’s try again, shall we? I can’t make promises for Ranma, but I’ll try to be your friend at least. We put any murder attempts and marriage schemes behind us, focus on friendship? And I mean friendship with the real you.”

“Well, fixing this will take some time,” Cologne said. “I was telling the truth when I said that only a phoenix pill can undo the cat’s tongue... and the only way to get one of those in this country will be when the Jusenkyo Merchant returns near the end of the month.”

Shui took a confident pose. “If tongzhi Ranma could do it, so can I.”

“Well... Ranma might be going girl full time,” Hibari replied (filled with a confidence Ranma certainly didn’t feel on the matter).

“Really? Then I must be like this. There supposed to be husband,” Shui said with a simple matter-of-fact tone.

“Shampoo, I said no more murder or marriage schemes,” Hibari replied flatly.

Shui pouted for a moment before letting out a sigh. “Fine. Can still call tongzhi cute, yes?”

“That I will allow,” Hibari replied with a smirk. Her face quickly grew serious though. “But seriously, it’s not going to be easy for you to be stuck like this a month. Ranma and I can handle it thanks to growing up with it, but you’re diving in the deep end. I’m going to have to give you a crash course on certain things...”

“Already understand a bit, like how one use urinal... but more information good,” Shui said.

«It’s good to see them patching things up. Your strategy worked, grandson,» Cologne whispered to Brush in Mandarin.

«My child’s own actions helped. I really must wonder though... could she really end up a husband?» he replied quietly.

«I think at this stage we should give up making assumptions,» the old woman whispered back.

* * *

Picolet Chardin had been told by one of the servant girls that there were two men waiting for him in their hall of mirrors. He wasn’t sure which servant girl, but that was the point. If you looked at servants you were doing it wrong.

She had sounded vaguely more scared than usual, but it was hard to tell. Those local girls they hired all seemed so overwhelmed by his charming masculinity.

Still, he felt it best to steel himself before opening the ornate oversized doors. He wanted to appear perfectly calm.

Confident that was the air he gave Chardin pushed the door open. The sight he found shattered his resolve in an instant.

There were two men, both dressed in suits, yet somehow able to look more thuggish for their fine dress. The larger one had a physique Chardin would expect from a particularly heavily built yeti.
The less large one was still a well built man with strong square features. Both were wearing dark sunglasses that gave them an aura of menace.

But the worst thing was the larger one had lifted the Chardin’s genuine Coysevox bust and was examining the bottom of it.

“How much do you think this thing’s worth?” Seiji asked Sabu, having apparently not noticed Chardin’s entrance.

“I dunno. Probably more than I make in a year though. Put it back before you drop it,” Sabu replied coolly, before turning to Picolet. “Yo. You’re Chardin, right?”

“I... I am indeed. Picolet Chardin II. Master of Martial Arts Dining. And you two are?” Chardin replied, sounding far more nervous than he’d hoped. The ogre of a man still hadn’t put the bust down...

“We’re a couple of concerned citizens,” Sabu replied coolly. “You see, our boss has taken an interest in the... Saotome you’re currently hosting. And the little challenge you two are going to have. Specifically, our boss wants to make sure everything’s all fair and proper, y’know?”

“We Chardin’s are always proper,” Picolet replied, watching nervously as Seiji finally put down the antique bust. Only to set his eyes on the 1690 Rouen porcelain. Picolet found himself biting into his knuckle as the thug picked up the 300 year old French produced fine china.

“Lotsa antiques and such here,” Seiji muttered as he lightly tossed the Rouen porcelain to take a look at the bottom. “Probably ensured though, right?”

Chardin nodded nervously.

“Don’t be so casual, Seiji. Antiques like these are worth more than the money insurance companies would pay. Nah... if something tragic befell this place, like say a fire, it would be devastating. Right, Chardin?” Sabu said.

“O-of course,” the Frenchman replied.

“Luckily the Chardins look smart. They don’t take needless risks to their estate by doing anything risky, like, say... appointin’ a biased judge to a martial arts match. Or other things that could upset people with extensive knowledge of how to commit arson,” Sabu explained.

“Honhon, no...” Chardin laughed awkwardly. “We’d be happy to have you find a referee.”

“Ah. How very kind. Seiji, thank the man,” Sabu replied, gesturing towards Picolet.

“You’re too nice, Mister Chardin,” Seiji said, marching menacingly towards the blond. Before bowing and handing him the Rouen porcelain.

“Seiji, Mister is English, not French,” Sabu stated as the two showed themselves out.

“Heh, oops. I’m not good at those foreign languages,” Seiji replied with a nervous laugh.

Chardin watched in terror as they left, afraid to move a muscle, lest he drop the priceless antique he was holding.

«Qu’est-ce que j’ai juste fait?» he whispered to himself.

* * *
It was here at last. The final competition between Chardin and Ran(ma). It was being hosted at the Wakaba school gymnasium, and, despite classes being out of the summer, had drawn the majority of the student body.

Chardin himself had been seated at the oversized dining table in the centre of the room as everyone filed in, holding himself aloof to all the energy surrounding him. After watching him run through his pre-dining mouth exercises, most of the audience were quite terrified. Nervously one of the school’s daring reporters approached him, a microphone in hand.

“Er... Ch-Chardin-san, I’m with the Wakaba Daily, and I was wondering-”

Chardin’s response to swallow the microphone whole as soon as it approached his face broke the reporters train of thought.

“Y-you’re going to have to pay for that.”

Chardin gave him a judgmental once over. “Hmph, if tu did not want it eaten, zen you should not have brought it so close to mon bouche. It shall go on ze bill for the meal. Ze lozer shall pay.”

The student reporter stormed off, hoping that he wasn’t going to be left with the bill.

Things were going much better for Hibari. Everyone wanted to place bets on this competition, to the point that her stall was nearly overwhelmed. The only thing keeping everyone orderly was the watchful eye of her father, who sat not too far away. His cold gaze (directed more at Hibari, and the miniskirt she was wearing, than the crowd) kept the betting cowed into behaving.

“Allright, and that was 1 400 yen on Chardin? Done... Huh, you think Shampoo is going to interrupt? 500 yen on that? Okay... And you’re-Oh! Akane,” Hibari said as her new acquaintance popped out of the crowd. “I didn’t know you were coming. Is your whole family here, or just you?"

“The whole family,” Akane replied, while Hibari tried to balance the conversation with taking more bets. “Nabiki and I want to see Ran wipe the smug look off that guy’s face.”

“Haha, me too,” Hibari replied. Glares and yelling from the betting pool caused her to shoot them an angry look. “Just because I want Ran to win doesn’t mean the betting is rigged!”

“Where’s her brother?” Akane asked, once protests died down a bit.

“Her... Yeah, well, he’s too nervous. Can’t bear to sit in the audience and just watch,” Hibari replied awkwardly. It was so hard to keep Ranma from seeming like a bad sibling.

“Wait, brother? I didn’t know-” someone there to make a bet began to ask.

Hibari however had pulled out a megaphone, to slightly deafen all those present as she shouted out “Betting is almost closed! 5 minutes until all bets are locked!”

Akane noticed as a rush of students appeared. “I think I’ll leave you too it!”

The youngest Tendo then hurried back to where her family were seated. She let out a sigh of relief when she realised Happosai had wandered off. Akane quietly sat down beside Nabiki, getting ready to wait.

“I should have come earlier,” Nabiki muttered. “If I’d known Oozora was running a betting pool... I could have offered to help out for a cut.”
“Now Nabiki, I’m not sure that’s wise. She is Yakuza, do you really want to risk getting mixed up in something like that?” Kasumi asked.

The middle sister shrugged. “Akane’s being pretty chummy with her.”

“I’m not going to get near her cash flow,” Akane protested. “That’s the dangerous thing.”

Soun sat in stoic silence. The master had run off to annoy Genma, and he was going to enjoy the break. Even if his daughters were apparently plotting to get tangled up with Yakuza... just as his best friend had.

He’d worry about that later.

* * *

Genma had been sitting quietly with Seiji, keeping an eye on Madame St. Paul as she stewed over not being allowed to referee. That was until Happosai showed up (preceded by shrieks from a number of Wakaba’s female students after he groped and harassed them).

“Genna, I’m quite disappointed in you,” the shrivelled old man announced.

“M-master Happosai... what a pleasure to see you. T-Tendo-kun told me you were doing well,” the part time panda replied nervously.

“I was fine, but now I’ve learned you didn’t trust me. I must say that I am wounded. Why would you hide that you had a daughter from your own sensei?”

“I... pardon?” Genma asked, taken aback by the question.

“Don’t play ignorant. I already heard everything from Tendo’s lovely girls.”

“Soun didn’t explain it? I... I suppose we were rather drunk when I told him,” Genma replied, half to himself.

Happosai’s reply was interrupted by the main doors opening, as Ranma, Sabu, and the guest referee were led in alongside a number of servants carrying platters.

“I’m very offended you didn’t tell me about her, Genma... she’s gorgeous. A little skinny, but still, nice curves nonetheless!” Happosai declared before turning to bound over.

Ranma was climbing the stairs to the centre stage when the shrivelled grandmaster attached himself directly to the redhead’s bust.

“Little Ran! It’s been too long!” Happosai announced, deciding to pretend he’d known this girl.

Ranma shrieked, too shocked for a moment to respond. Sabu however had been expecting this and drew his Katana to point towards Happosai’s head. Ranma was locked in awkward tension, the blade also being just a few centimetres from the pigtailed girl’s bust.

“What is with everyone? I drop out of society for 14 years and suddenly everyone is pulling weapons on each other over the slightest issue,” Happosai said, glaring at the blade. “But I don’t care. With that metal corset around her midsection this is barely any fun. Eat a bit more young girl, and then you would be perfect!”

Happosai then bounded away.
In the direction of the girls’ change room. (Of course.)

“Ah... well, with that, erm, interruption out of the way, let us begin,” the guest referee announced. He was obviously European, and dressed in a manner that seemed fitting of a FIFA referee (only with pants rather than shorts). “I am Stijn van der Westhuizen, of the Dutch Martial Arts Dining Federation, Orient Division. This match is between Picolet Chardin and Saotome Ran. Whichever contestant clears all of his or her plates first shall be counted the winner. Time penalties shall be applied for undignified manners. There are of course more rules, but I don’t want to bore the audience, as both parties are already aware of these rules.”

There had been some whispers of confusion in the crowd at Ranma being introduced as Ran, but silence descended as the referee raised his hand. «One. Two. Three. Go!»

The two contestants dove into the food before them with nearly inhuman speed. As the audience struggled to keep track of movements, Chardin realised he was definitely eating more than intended. Glancing over at Ran’s plates he realised he was losing the competition.

‘Ah, but there is one weakness for all those who follow the parlay technique,’ he thought to himself as he deftly flipped a plate into his mouth as a shield. ‘You shall tire, ma petite amour, and then I shall win by default!’

“Undignified behaviour, 30 second penalty to Chardin,” the referee announced.

Shocked, Picolet dropped his shield and turned to argue with the referee. “How dare you! Do you realise who I am!?”

“Placing the china in your mouth is a violation of etiquette rules,” Stijn replied curtly. “Your family name isn’t as important as etiquette.”

Chardin’s jaw dropped in shock. He’d never heard such absurdity! He was also quite shocked as the audience started cheering.

“Did you see that? A whole turkey, and he barely noticed it go in!”

“Go Ra...Ran!”

Chardin realised that in his shock he’d opened himself to an attack by Ran. Chardin realised protest was useless and chose to initiate a parlay of his own. Unfortunately Ranma’s mouth was such a small target that even Chardin’s efforts to stretch his mouth out of the way left the two of them roughly equal.

Ranma was beginning to feel the pangs of hunger as the competition went on. A stalemate would be Chardin’s game. Unless... it would be playing dirty, but that was core to Anything Goes, wasn’t it? The redhead wore a mischievous smirk while launching a potato across the table. Not at Chardin’s mouth, but rather his forehead.

The Frenchman winced as the tuber bounced off his forehead.

“Messy eating penalty. 10 seconds,” the referee called.

“Now wait... just un moment! That was.. Clearly the... work of my opponent!” Chardin protested awkwardly as Ranma launched food into the blond’s open mouth.

“It hit your face. A proper diner can intercept any food headed their way,” the Dutchman countered.
“I am trying... not to... eat her... food!” Chardin shot back, yet more of Ranma’s dishes being emptied his way as he argued with the judge.

“Etiquette stands above all else,” Stijn stated flatly.

Chardin was prepared to argue the point more when a meatball slapped into his forehead, leaving a patch of sauce. “She IS clearly juste using zis as a food fight!”

“Which is allowed. It is on you to provide adequate defense. This is martial arts dining. It is a food fight. So... 10 second penalty again.”

Furious, Chardin turned to his red haired opponent and began wildly flinging food in Ranma’s general direction. Obviously two could play at that game. Ranma intercepted the majority of Chardin’s and launched them back to Chardin’s plates. One tomato bounced off Ranma’s cheek, but the redhead made no effort to protest the ten second penalty the referee called for. It just meant a need to be 10 seconds faster.

Ranma’s speed was starting to waver as hunger weakened the redhead. Teetering on the brink, Ranma worried about collapse.

‘Just the effort to keep my mouth closed to Chardin can’t make me eat anything is getting tiring,’” Ranma thought. Until the lightbulb went off. ‘Wait, why am I not eating anything?’

Ranma’s mouth fell open, and the redhead began to eat as much as possible. One hand was focused on directing Chardin’s assault into Ranma’s mouth, while the other sent food on Ranma’s own plate across the table to Chardin’s side.

Picolet found himself confused at Ranma’s tactic, and took a brief pause to understand what level of deception was clearly involved; a pause that allowed Chardin to watch as the last bit of food on Ranma’s plates vanished, zipping across to one of Chardin’s plates almost too fast to see.

“Saotome wins!” the referee announced, to the cheering of much of the crowd.

Picolet’s jaw dropped to the ground. It took him a moment or two to regain some level of composure. “V-very well, madame. You win. The engagement in null and void.”

Grumpily, Chardin tossed the key to Ranma’s corset over to the redhead.

As the Frenchman stood up and stormed out of the gymnasium (Madame St. Paul close behind) a wave of students flooded to Hibari, demanding their winnings.

* * *

Hibari sat quietly on Ranma’s bed, waiting for the pigtailed cutie to come up from the bath. Cleaning under where the corset had been was obviously a logical priority. Of course a secondary reason Ranma would have wanted a bath simply didn’t occur to Hibari until her handsome black haired fiancé walked into the room. Wearing only a towel over the shoulders and a pair of track pants Hibari could certainly see the weight Ranma had lost. But that barely registered.

“You’re in boy form?” Hibari asked.

Ranma smiled weakly and sat down beside Hibari. “Yeah. While I was stuck with that corset... it took a couple days, but I was squirmin’ almost as bad as I was with the cat’s tongue. I-I’m such a mess ain’t I? Can’t even figure out somethin’ as basic as if I’m a guy or a girl. I really appreciate your patience, but still... sorry ‘bout all this.”
Hibari gave Ranma a warm smile and pulled the handsome boy into a hug. “It’s not always such an easy thing to figure out. It took me a couple years once I started thinking about it.”

“A couple years when ya were, like, 6. I’m sixteen. I’m basically an adult...”

Hibari put her hand on Ranma’s chin and turned the dark haired boy to face her. “Ranma, don’t compare yourself to my journey. I have 3 sisters. One of whom loved to dress me up for tea parties when I was little. And I had the chance to feel jealousy over how they got dolls to play with, and I didn’t. You didn’t have anything like that to get the ball rolling.”

“I guess that’s true,” Ranma replied quietly, pulling Hibari into a hug. “Thanks.”

The two just sat there in silence for a few minutes. Enjoying one another’s company. Both had things they knew needed saying, but right now they just wanted to enjoy the other’s presence.

Ranma slowly realised there was one thing worth saying. “The guest referee was your doing, wasn’t it?”

Hibari looked up at him and smiled. “Mmmaybe. At the very least I got the ball rolling. You do represent an important investment for daddy, so it didn’t take much to convince him to find a friendly referee.”

“He wasn’t bribed or anythin’, was he?”

Hibari gave Ranma a hurt look before giving an overdramatic reply. “I’m shocked you would suspect my honest and upstanding family of such a shady move. We are an honourable and law abiding house.”

Hibari kept up her shocked look, and Ranma an apologetic look, for a few seconds. Then both burst into laughter.

“Pfft... but no. We didn’t do anything like that. Knew you’d value your honour in combat too much,” Hibari replied.

“Thanks. Again,” Ranma replied with a smile.

The pair locked eyes, and found themselves slowly sliding forward for a kiss. As their lips were mere centimetres apart... Ranma’s stomach growled loudly.

Hibari shot him a lidded glare. “Way to ruin the mood.”

“Ah shush it. I’ll eat later,” Ranma countered, before leaning in and kissing Hibari anyway.
Shiina Makoto had been sneering the whole match between Ranma and Chardin. How Hibari could prefer someone who wasn’t even a guy half the time... it didn’t make any sense. But he knew he was tired of beating around the bush. As soon as he saw Hibari head off down a hallway on her own, he set off to follow her.

He thanked his long legs for letting him catch up to her before she reached her destination (which was undoubtedly the girls’ change room, where Saotome was insultingly changing for this match).

“What are you after now, Shiina?” Hibari asked as the lanky boxer slipped past her and came to a stop.

“Why are you still with Saotome? He’s barely a man,” Shiina asked, leaning down into Hibari’s personal space.

“Shiina, honestly... I don’t care about your opinion on this,” Hibari replied flatly, balling her fists.

“I’m trying to be patient here, Hibari-chan,” Shiina replied, “But I don’t want to see you throw your life away for some... whatever Saotome is.”

Hibari’s eyes narrowed before the hitting him with a front hook to the cheek. Shiina slammed into the wall across the the hallway with a satisfying crunch. “I’m done with your nonsense Shiina. I love Ranma, and that’s not changing.”

Shiina was left a bit dazed as he fell out of the fresh hole in the wall which matched his silhouette.

“Oh...”

* * *

It had been a couple of days, but Shiina remained bitter. Fuming in his family living room, sprawled halfway between the couch and coffee table, he angrily flicked his cigarette butt into the pot of the house palm in the corner. His mother would complain, but what did he care right now?

“Pheh... I shouldn’t be so hung up on one girl. I could easily get another babe,” Shiina muttered to himself as he ran his messy mop of dark brown hair he’d long ago given up turning into a proper pompadour. “Plenty o’ fish in the sea... but dang it! Saotome doesn’t deserve her!”

Shiina yelped in surprise as the coffee table was suddenly kicked out from under him, causing him to thump unceremoniously onto the tatami mat floor.

“Are you trying to get over her or not!?” a man’s voice yelled out.

Gazing over grumpily, Makoto was greeted to the sight of his father. Married life had left the man with a not insignificant pot belly, but beneath it lay the frame of a former boxer. And of course, he kept his hair slicked back in a clean pompadour as always, with those black sunglasses that rarely left his face firmly in place.

“Make up your mind, Makoto. I didn’t raise you to be indecisive like this!”

Shiina lept to his feet, attempting to look dignified. “If she’d chosen any other guy I’d look the other way, pa, but... Saotome shouldn’t even count as a man!”
“If he’s that much of a worm... maybe you should take a page from my old pal Jimmy’s playbook. Walk up to him with a big ol’ smile,” his father explained, flashing a toothy grin to further the instructions, “and then, when his defenses are down... ya give him the old ‘sucker punch to the gut’. That was one of Jimmy favourite moves.”

“I’d love to, but Saotome’s a martial artist. I could barely land a hit last time I fought him.”

Shiina Sr. struck a dramatic pose, stroke his chin in thought as the assessed the issue. “Mhm... well, it’s been a few years since I paid Jimmy a visit. C’mon, I’ll take you to go meet him. He was always an excellent scrapper, and from what I remember he’s got a couple of kids right around your age who would make good training partners.”

“You think he’d give me lessons?” Makoto asked.

“Oh, for sure. He and I go way back.”

“Sounds like it’s worth a shot,” Makoto replied as he followed his father to the front door.

“Oh, you’re heading out, are you? Well... next time, remember not to traipse around the house in your shoes, like a couple of Americans!” Shiina’s mother shouted angrily as she waved a mop at them. “Honestly, I spend more time cleaning up after you two... And on the tatami, just to make it worse.”

* * *

The walls were at least 4m tall. And stretched on for what seemed like it should have been three or four city blocks. Then there was the gate house, which Shiina swore was nearly as big as his own home.

“Yeah, Jimmy’s family’s got dough,” Shiina’s father said as he walked up and rang the doorbell.

“Boss,” was all Makoto managed to mutter as his mind boggled at the riches on display here.

After a few moments a small section of the door, at least two metres up, slid open to reveal a pair of judging eyes. “Who goes there?”

“Yo! It’s Shiina. Shiina ‘Sammy’ Sanji. I’m an old friend of Kuno-san’s.”

“Oh! Sammy! It’s been too long!” the voice behind the gate squeaked.

The was the sound of hopping. And then some crashing. After a gap long enough to confuse Makoto, the door finally swung open and revealed a rather diminutive man in some sort of ninja costume.

“Eeey! Sasuke! I see you’re still not having any luck with the beard,” Shiina Sr. said, bonking the small man on the head.

“I do have to apologise,” Sasuke explained as he led them into the grounds of what was clearly a castle. “Kuno-sama is on an extended getaway to Hawaii right now. His son has taken over managing the estate.”

“Has he taken after his old man in fighting skill?” the elder Shiina asked.

“He’s a nationally ranked Kendoist,” Sasuke replied, holding a door open for them to enter the main building. “Not quite as resourceful as his father, but probably better in a straight up fight.”
“Aha, perfect news. He should make a good sparring partner for you, Makoto,” Shiina’s father said happily.

Makoto was left wondering how on earth a boxer like him was supposed to spar a kendoist as they entered some kind of... Makoto figured it would be called a sitting room? Living room seemed too normal for a place this plush. Lounging on a couch that wouldn’t even fit in the Shiina family living room was a guy who looked roughly Makoto’s age, with poofy brown hair and wearing a loosely tied kendo gi. He seemed deep in thought, scribbling away on a small pad of paper.

“Dearest Akane-no, no... Fairest? Bah, I have used that term on far too many occasions. Perchance a new turn of phrase would assist,” he muttered to himself as he scratched something out. “Sasuke fetch me an eraser!! And a thesaurus!”

“O-of course Tatewaki-sama, but first, I must introduce our guests,” the small ninja replied nervously.

Kuno Tatewaki leapt to his feet, and struck a dramatic pose as if he were an actor coming onto a stage. “Greetings, good sirs. It is I, Kuno Tatewaki, head of the Tatewaki house. Rising star of the Kendo world. And devoted practitioner of the arts of chivalry.”

As the pompous fellow turned to take a proper look at his guests Makoto couldn’t help but smirk at how the other teen did a double take at Makoto’s height advantage. It wasn’t much (really, just enough to be noticed), but it felt good to take this guy down a peg without even having to do anything.

“Man, what are they feeding kids in this generation,” Shiina’s father said. “All as tall as bean sprouts. Anyhow... Name’s Shiina Sanji. I’m old friends with your father.”

Tatewaki nodded, giving Makoto a slight side eye. “And to what do I owe this honour of hosting thee and thine son?”

“Well, Makoto here’s been having a bit of difficulty. Got a girl he likes, but she’s got her eyes on another.”

“Dad... I can explain it for myself,” Makoto hissed.

The elder Shiina shrugged. “You weren’t though, so I thought I would.”

Tatewaki however was lost in his own little world, nodding away. “Mhm, yes. A matter of love unrequited... that is indeed a worthy cause. I shall train you! This way!”

Makoto found himself following, more than a little confused. His father just waved him off, before apparently deciding stay and chat with Sasuke.

“Be sure to stay close, commoner. The Kuno estate was deliberately designed to serve as a maze as a means to defend against intruders. Only one familiar with the halls, such as myself, can navigate in confidence,” Tatewaki explained confidently, before opening a sliding door... only to freeze in shock.

Shiina poked his head over to see what caused his guide to freeze, and was met with a room whose walls were covered in pictures of some girl with long dark blueish hair.

“I, heh... The design is so ingenious, even defenders may get lost at times,” Kuno replied awkwardly as he closed the door slowly. “The dojo would be that way! Yes.”
Shiina rolled his eyes. It wasn’t the first time he’d seen something like that after all.

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“Ow. Ow. Ow.”

Sure, he’d been given kendo gear as protection, but Shiina was fast learning that Kuno hit like a dump truck. Only faster. Of course, if he survived this training, then he was certain he’d be fast enough to fight Ranma after learning to dodge Kuno’s swipes.

“An acceptable commencement. Yes, I can see the fire in thine eyes... yet it has not been fed. Wherever thou train now... it does not challenge thee enough. We shall have three training sessions a week for the length of summer holiday.”

“Cool... can I get more padding for my arms?” Shiina asked as he gingerly rubbed his sore forearms.

“That would defeat the purpose,” Kuno replied flatly.

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Kaji stared longingly at the wall of photos of Tsubame he had collected over the past year. His love for her had grown so much stronger since they were placed in the same class. And his photo collection had grown so much larger. Yet... he still felt unsatisfied.

Suddenly his thick eyebrows shot up in realisation. “Of course! I can ask Tsubame-kun on a date!”

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“\textit{Take me to ssuummmer ssiiiide! Na da da da!}" Suzume sang to herself as she walked home from her friend’s house.

Her happy singing stopped when she saw a strange man with angular features apparently trying to will his way through her family’s front door. The guy turned to her and lit up.

“Ah! You must be Tsubame-kun’s little sister! I’m her friend Kaji from school,” the teen said in a nasally voice. “I just get nervous about knocking. Heheh.”

Suzume raised an eyebrow, more than a bit skeptical, but figured the guy looked harmless enough, and so opened the door. Crossing into the genkan she gave a shout, “I’m home! I found one of Tsubame’s friends wandering the street! I’m going to go watch anime!”

After shouting she turned and glared at Kaji. “Stay here. Don’t move. Someone’ll come get you.”

Kaji was slightly terrified how the girl’s icy glare vanished into childish glee as she skipped away down the hallway. She was definitely much more intense than Tsubame. Luckily the target of his affection showed up as soon as the little blue haired girl left. The way her expression turned serious upon seeing him made his heart flutter.

“Kaji... w-what are you doing here?” she asked.

“Tsubame!” the captain of the Wakaba boxing team shouted as he rushed over to hug her.

The brown haired Oozora barely slipped out the his way, and the two began a brief chase of Kaji lunging for a hug as he called her name while Tsubame dodged. The two froze when they heard giggling from the hallway.
“Don’t stop on my accord,” Hibari said as she poked her head around the corner.

Tsubame turned and shot Kaji her best glare. “So, what did you want anyway?”

“Oh, right,” the angular lad replied, straightening up and brushing some non-existent fluff from his clothing. “I bought some movie tickets. They were having a sale. So I bought two. For this Sunday. You’re free? Excellent! It’s a date then.”

Handing one of the tickets to Tsubame before she could reply either way, Kaji waved and then departed (all the while laughing in a slightly maniacal manner).

Tsubame watched him for a minute, frozen in shock, before turning to ask Hibari a question. Only to find her younger sibling have vanished. Luckily it didn’t take too long to find the blonde, Ranma, and Suzume sitting in front of the TV, laughing away over some anime.

“What a dork,” the small redhead snorted.

“I love his sisters,” Hibari said between laughs. “Man, what I’d do with psychic powers...”

“Hibari,” Tsubame began a sweetly as she could. “I need to ask a favour from you...”

“Oh? What would that be sis?” Hibari asked, walking over to the doorway beside Tsubame (so that the television would distract her less). She was pretty sure she knew, but wanted to hear Tsubame say it.

“Well... you saw how Kaji was being weird, and asked me on that date. I find him sort of creepy, but you know me. I’m not good at playing the bad cop, so... could you go in my place to dump him for me?” the older sister asked hopefully.

“Hmm... I was hoping to get a date with Ranma, now that the make up exams are done... buuuut, I might be open to offering my services, on one condition.”

“What’s that?” Tsubame asked, a bit nervous.

“I want you to refer to me as sister for a month.”


“Well then, I’m sure Kaji will have good breath when he goes to kiss you. Shiina was telling me how he loves raw onions,” Hibari replied with a wink.

Tsubame glared at her for a moment. “Fine. I’ll call you sister for a month...”

Hibari lit up and hugged her older sister. “I bet you’ll forget you ever did otherwise by the end of the month.”

Ranma and Suzume both clapped.

“Yeah, yeah...” Tsubame muttered, deflating.

“Of course, for services rendered, I’ll expect to be paid my going rate,” Hibari said as she broke the hug.

“Paid!? You said I just had to pretend you’re a girl for a month!” the brunette protested.

“Nah. That was what it took to offer access to my services. It didn’t help you with paying for them,”
Hibari replied with a shrug, before holding out a hand to accept some cash.

“Th-that’s downright criminal!”

“Sis... you do know what our family business is, right?” Hibari asked flatly.

“Fiine. I’ll get my wallet,” Tsubame replied, sighing.

“I think 2 500 yen should cover it! Unless he gets fresh!” Hibari called out as her sister walked away.

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“So, after the movie’s done at 3, ya want me ta show up in a disguise ta give ya back up,” the black haired teen asked while sitting at Tsubame’s desk.

“Mhm. It’ll make rejecting him easier if you come along,” Hibari replied as she stood in only her underwear flitting through Tsubame’s clothes. “Where. Is. That. Skirt? Hm... Oh, wait, right! I borrowed it. It’s probably in my room somewhere.”

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As they left the movie theatre, Hibari really wasn’t sure what to make of that film. As she slyly adjusted he brown wig she wondered why they couldn’t just adopt, rather than stealing a child from a set of quintuplets. She really couldn’t understand it.

“S-so, Tsubame! What do you say we head out for dinner, maybe?” Kaji asked, his voice more nasally for his nerves.

Hibari’s eyes searched the street before them. It was about time for Ranma to show up. Where could the pigtailed cutie be though... Ranma’s handsome face was nowhere to be seen.

“Tsubame-chan!” a girl squeaked from not too far away.

Hibari turned to the source, and found herself looking at a deeply dolled up girl Ranma. Where Ranma found such a nice blue-black wig on such short notice Hibari wasn’t sure, though she did recognise the dress as one of the ones Ranma had bought on that first girl day. It wasn’t what she expected, but Hibari couldn’t help lighting up at the sight of her beloved.

“Oh, heheh, you seem really happy to see her, Tsubame. I’m not sure I recognise her though,” Kaji said, leaning a little too close for either girl’s comfort.

“Oh, yeah. This is... Emiko. She’s an old friend and goes to a different school. We were planning to go get ice cream,” Hibari explained. She was going to have to improvise a bit if Ranma couldn’t fill the role of a boyfriend in this disguise.

“Ah! Ice cream sounds good. I know a great place!” Kaji declared.

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“Kaji, stop. Just eat your ice cream,” Hibari hissed, as the boxing team captain tried to put his arm around her again.

Ranma was trying to enjoy the ice cream, but the way Kaji kept invading Hibari’s personal space was driving the redhead up the wall. Even if it had been Tsubame he was annoying Ranma would have been upset... as it was, the diminutive martial artist was seeing red.
Not able to take it anymore, Ranma stood up and marched around the table to grab Kaji by the collar and yanked him from his chair. “Listen, pal. I really don’t like the way you’re bother my-” (Ranma had to pause a moment. ‘Fiancée’ was not an option right now... what was a good term to explain Ranma’s outrage? Oh, right!) “-my girlfriend!”

“You’re...” Kaji said, staring blankly at Ranma, before laughing nervously. “Ohh, right! Girls just call each other that all the time. Heh, heh.”

“No, I mean it!” Ranma shouted, letting Kaji drop to the ground before turning and kissing Hibari firmly on the lips.


Hibari paused a moment, shocked to have Ranma be quite so forward in the circumstances. The way Ranma turned bright red while listening to whispers spread across the ice cream parlor clearly showed that her fiancé had not thought matters through. Still, this worked quite well for Hibari’s needs.

“Mhm, it’s like that. I would really appreciate if you keep this quiet at school though, Kaji,” Hibari said sweetly.

“I have to go!” Kaji declared, scrambling over the table and scurrying off to the door.

Where he promptly bumped into the real Tsubame, who was checking her watch as she walked in.

In a moment of panic he glanced between the ‘Tsubame’ he’d been on a date with and the Tsubame he bumped into, before yelling something indiscernible and running off into the street.

In all the commotion it was only as a grumpy Tsubame sat down across from them that Ranma and Hibari noticed that she’d had her previously shoulder length hair trimmed down to a soft pageboy haircut.

“What did you two do?” Tsubame asked flatly. The blushing faces and way half the parlour was staring at them gave Tsubame a bad feeling.

“I, er, that is... we helped Kaji realise you weren’t interested,” Ranma replied a bit nervously.

Tsubame just let out a sigh. “Whatever. My friends are meeting me here, so if you two could get lost, I’d appreciate it.”

* * *

“This has got to be Tokyo, right?” Ryoga asked as he walked past the Glico Running Man of Dotonbori.
“So, when someone says ‘disguise’, you always hear ‘girl disguise’, don’t you Ranma?” Hibari said as she watched the shorter girl getting changed.

“I suppose... it’s nice to have a reason to dress up,” Ranma muttered while pulling on a sleeveless red silk shirt. “Well... we’re supposed to eat for dinner the Tendos, right? I’m bettin’ we’ll probably be sparrin’ after, and they’ve apparently got a proper dojo. So, if ya got a real gi or anythin’ ya should probably wear it.”

“Don’t worry Ranma, I’ve already got it packed,” Hibari replied.

Ranma nodded, pulling on a pair of loose pants. “Y’know... we should probably come clean ta Akane about my condition.”

“Are you sure you want to do that?” Hibari asked as she walked over through the open divider to her room. “You’ve got a chance to have a friend who only knows you as a girl. Don’t you want to see how that goes?”

The redhead sighed while wandering over to sit on Hibari’s bed as the other girl got ready now. “I’m curious, but I feel kinda guilty lyin’ ta her.”

Ranma became lost in thought, trying to understand how to confess the truth. Afterall, would the label of ‘guy’ actually fit anymore either? Both options felt kind of like a lie right now (and yet also like the . It confused Ranma enough that the sudden appearance of Hibari with a small makeup brush of some sort mere centimetres from Ranma’s face caused the redhead to jump back.

“W-what are ya doin’?”

“I was just thinking that I don’t go through my purple eyeliner fast enough, and it does look good on you.”

“It would look weird for me ta confess ta bein’ a guy while wearin’ makeup,” Ranma protested, though the redhead’s protests rang rather hollow. To be honest, Ranma wanted to wear some (especially if Hibari was applying it), but still felt guilty about the idea.

Hibari shook her head and went back to sorting through her clothes for something to wear.

Ranma stood nervously at the front door to the Tendo Dojo, a watermelon in hand. Hibari stood casually beside the redhead, and leaned forward to knock on the door. After only a moment a cheerful Akane slid the door open. She wore a large smile and a yellowish gi.

“Hi! You guys are right on time,” the dark haired girl said, beaming away. “Dinner is going to be a little late since daddy has some guests over. Of course, that just means we can spar first. There’s a spare room upstairs you can use to change if you need.”

“I’m good,” Ran(ma) said with a shrug. “Hibari?”

“Oh yeah, I’ll run up and change. I meet you guys in the dojo,” the blonde replied.

“Don’t worry Hibari, I’ll show you the way up,” Akane said, before poking her head in the kitchen.
“Kasumi, could you show Ran to the dojo?”

“Yes, of course,” the eldest Tendo girl replied as she emerged from the kitchen.

“Right, and we brought ya this,” Ran said, handing Kasumi the watermelon.

“Oh my, this must have been quite expensive, there was really no need... but thank you,” Kasumi replied as she took the melon from Ran.

Kasumi disappeared into the kitchen for a moment, but quickly returned and began to lead her guest to the dojo. Ran followed the older girl quietly. It wasn’t a long walk, though the pair were a bit surprised to find the dojo wasn’t totally empty. A tanned lad with short black hair about Ran’s age was struggling his way through what Ran recognised as a fairly beginner kata of Anything Goes style.

“It’s good to see you practicing, Kousaku,” Kasumi said softly.

“Oh? Heh, hi. Yeah, between Akane and the old master, I figure I’ve got to practice to keep from being turned into a pulp,” Kousaku replied awkwardly.

“Heh, well... I can show ya how a pro does that kata,” Ran boasted. “Watch this!”

Ran moved to the centre of the dojo, gave a quick bow, and then dove into the kata. Getting to perform for an audience was something the redhead had always enjoyed, and Ran could tell Kousaku’s attention was unwavering. However it was only after spinning around quickly for a kick that the pigtailed gender bender realised just where Kousaku had been staring.

“Stop staring at my butt and pay attention to the technique!”

“S-sorry,” Kousaku apologised awkwardly.

Kousaku was saved from further chastising by the arrival of Akane and Hibari. The blonde had changed into a crisp white judo gi, a black belt around her waist, and a sarashi wrapped around her chest just barely peeking out.

Ranma had to struggle to avoid blushing at the sight.

‘I’m such a jerk, yelling at that guy for checkin’ me out and then turnin’ around and doing the same thing,’ Ran thought silently as Hibari sauntered past, swinging her hips seductively for the redhead.

“So many cute girls. Tokyo really is the best,” Kousaku muttered to himself, earning a quick elbow to the gut from Akane as she walked past.

“Alright, let’s spar!” Hibari announced gleefully, ignoring the way the lone boy in the room had doubled over.

“If you don’t mind, I think I’d like to spar Ran first,” Akane said. “It would be good to see a pro of the Saotome branch in action.”

Ran replied with a cocky smirk. “Sounds good. I’m curious what the Tendo branch is like too.”

The pair bowed to one another before Akane slid into a fighting stance. Ran remained slack and loose. Akane charged in with a barrage of punches, most of which Ran dodged easily enough, though one or two the shorter girl had to block.

“Come on Ran!” Hibari shouted.
“Go Akane!” Kousaku countered.

Akane gritted her teeth and pushed herself to move as fast as she could. She’d been getting faster lately, now that Kuno was holding back much less than he used to in their morning duels, but Ran still felt like someone on a whole different level. Relying on a series of light jabs to fake her opponent out, Akane then dropped into a leg sweep. Ran was caught off guard, but managed to arch into a backflip and land gracefully a metre or so away.

The shorter girl gave a quick nod of approval before charging in at full speed. Akane barely had time to try and block before Ranma’s strike collided with her... and it turned out to be a light two finger jab to the forehead.

“Woohoo! Good work Ran!” Hibari cheered.

As the adrenaline and shock wore off Akane began to giggle. “I have to admit, I did better than I thought I would. Still, you’re amazing, Ran. Your speed and grace... if I could fight like that I probably wouldn’t have to worry about accusations of being unfeminine for doing martial arts.”

Ran answered with an awkward laugh. “I’m not sure I would really call my moves all that feminine. I mean, it was pops who taught me.”

“I’ve seen you two spar. You’ve definitely added grace to the moves, Ran,” Hibari replied with a wink.

The redhead blushed a bit, muttering vague half denials.

“So, who do I get to spar?” Hibari asked.

* * *

The three girls had spent a good half hour sparring and discussing techniques (while Kousaku watched under the excuse of learning). Hibari had generally proven faster than Akane, but in any situation the latter got a chance to grapple it became clear Akane held a major advantage in that field. Even Ran was pinned by her one round.

“Phew, that was a good work out,” Akane said, panting a little. “It’s so great to have girls to spar with... Whenever I tried joining martial arts clubs are school it would be full of boys.”

“What’s so bad about boys?” Ran asked, slightly nervous.

“Don’t get her started,” Kousaku muttered.

“I’m too pooped to get started right now,” a sweaty Akane replied, before smiling. “Probably for the best. No point ruining the evening having to think about how annoying boys can be. Kousaku... he’s learned to behave himself. Mostly. But the rest of them... Anyway! We should go check if Daddy’s guests have left or not.”

Akane hopped to her feet and headed back into the Tendo home. The other three teens scrambled after her, Ran deciding that may now wasn’t quite the best time to bring up the curse. They reached the genkan just as Soun was waving off a couple of middle aged men.

As they left and Soun closed the door, Hibari chimed in. “Hey, those guys work with one of the municipal planning committees, don’t they?”

“Huh, well yes. How did you know that?” Soun asked.
“A girl has her ways,” Hibari said with a wink.

Hibari giggled as the three girls headed off down the hallway. Walking past the family room, Ran and Hibari were starting to wonder where they were headed when Akane opened the door to a combined washroom/laundry room.

“I figure we she probably wash up quickly before dinner,” Akane said as walked into the changing area.

Hibari paled and slid behind Ran. “I, uh... I’m really nervous about this sort of stuff.”

Ran nodded. “Y-yeah! Sh-she’s really self conscious.”

Akane blinked, feeling confused for a moment. “Oh, uh, okay. I’ll let you two go first then, since you’re the guests.”

Akane smiled and waved quickly as she walked out of the room, closing the door behind her. Ran shrugged, and began undressing. The redhead was down to underwear before noticing Hibari was turned around to face a corner and was acting very reluctant.

“What’s wrong, Hibari,” Ranma asked, walking up to whisper in the taller girl’s ear. “Normally your buggin’ me ta join ya in the bath.”

“That... well, that was usually teasing,” Hibari replied. “I liked seeing you flustered.”

“This ain’t the first time we’ve had a bath together,” the redhead said, placing a hand on Hibari’s shoulder.

“Yeah, but... but...” Hibari paused, and unclasped her bra to let it and the padding inside fall away from her chest as she turned to face Ranma. “I was different then.”

“W-would it help if I ran in and changed first?” Ranma asked. “I can use warm water the whole way.”

“I... yes. Thank you,” Hibari replied. “I like you either way, but... it’s awkward when I’m reminded I’m kind of the less feminine one at times.”

“You’re always plenty feminine, but I think I get what ya mean,” Ranma replied, backing off a bit.

Ranma finished stripping and hurried into the furo. When Hibari entered the black haired boy was looking away. Ranma waited for the sound of Hibari sitting on a stool before peeking over.

“Is it alright if I turn around?”

Hibari gave a gentle smile. “Yeah, sure.”

Ranma lit up with a smile and spun around. Hibari was still slightly turned away to preserve her modesty, but was lathering up. The pair scrubbed up quietly for a few moments, Ranma making sure to use warm water for rinsing. Both helped by washing the other’s back, Hibari giving quieter (but no less suggestive) moans of joy.

Ranma then slipped off for a quick soak in the tub, turning away at Hibari’s request so that she could slip in the tub as well. Curiosity was getting the better of Ranma by the point where they were both sitting in the tub however, and the taller teen couldn’t help trying to get a little peak at Hibari’s birth form. Instead of seeing anything, Ranma got splashed in the eyes by a squirt of water.
“A girl must keep her secrets. Part of the allure... maybe I’ll let you see on our wedding night,” Hibari whispered, laughing to herself.

The idea of getting rather adventurous on their wedding night suddenly struck Ranma, and the raven haired teen was soon distracted by a nose bleed. By the time Ranma recovered, Hibari was already out halfway in the changing area and nearly dressed. Ranma applied a quick splash of cold water and hurried after her.

“What are you two giggling and blushing about?” Akane asked as the two walked out into the hallway.

“N-nothin’,” Ran blurted.

“She’s just easy to tease,” Hibari explained.

Akane accepted that and hurried off for a quick wash up herself. Hibari and Ran found themselves patiently waiting in the Tendo family room, with only Nabiki and a nervous looking Kousaku for company.

“So... what do you think of our humble abode?” Nabiki asked.

“It’s a nice little place,” Hibari replied.

“Mhm. I liked the dojo. That’s definitely bigger than the one the Oozora’s have,” Ran added.

“Higher ceiling too, which is good if you want to practice area combat. Still, the Oozora’s have a lot more yard space, and pops an’ I would probably train out there either way.”

Nabiki nodded thoughtfully. Usually people balked at her calling the Tendo’s home ‘humble’ with the way their property covered a full city block. (A somewhat smallish block, but still enough to fit at least 6 homes by Nerima’s usual tight lot sizes.) Yet these two not only didn’t even blink, but Ran went so far as to consider it small... there was definitely good money to be had here.

Her plan of attack was ruined by Soun practically skipping into the room with a bottle of saké in hand. “Haha! This is such a grand opportunity.”

“Yes daddy? What happened?” Nabiki asked, as if she’d not eavesdropped on his entire meeting.

Soun poured out a little saké and drank drank it, all the while humming merrily to himself. “Your father has been chosen to fill a position on the ward council. There will be an election to worry about, of course, but that’s pretty well a formality in our district.”

“Congratulations sir!” Hibari cheered, while eyeing the saké and wondering when he was planning to share.

Ran, Kousaku and Nabiki likewise gave their cheers. Soun began to ramble on a bit about what an opportunity this all was. After a few minutes a freshened up Akane joined the table, and was given a sarcastic summary of Soun’s good news by Nabiki.

“Oh good, everyone is here,” Kasumi chimed as she peeked in from the doorway nearest the kitchen, before walking in with their dinner in hand. “I certainly hope I made enough.”

As the eldest Tendo girl laid the meal out and began to ensure everyone had their servings, everyone had to admit it smelled wonderful. Tasting it revealed that smell was just the start of a perfect meal. Of course, more than a few minds were otherwise occupied. Ran was struggling with guilt over not telling the truth, and wrestling with the idea that maybe the truth wasn’t all that clear cut. Nabiki was
trying to figure out if she could con any money out of Hibari or Ran (the latter certainly seeming an easier mark). Lastly, Hibari was mostly busy being annoyed Soun had never shared the saké.

As the evening wound down, Hibari and Ran were soon headed out to door.

“I hope to see you both again soon,” Akane said, her voice cheerful.

“I suspect that will happen,” Hibari replied with a wink.

“Definitely! I had fun,” Ran added cheerfully as the two set off.

Once they had covered a few blocks with their walking, Hibari draped her arm over Ranma’s shoulder and leaned down to whisper in the short girl’s ear. “So, what happened to telling Akane about your condition?”

“Y-you heard her. She’s not a fan a guys... between that an’ what ya said about the benefits of a friend who only knows me as a girl, I figured maybe I’d wait a little longer,” Ranma replied meekly.

Hibari smiled and gave Ranma a quick peck on the cheek. “I’m sure it will work out for the best. Just go with the flow.”

* * *

It was a little past 3:30 am when Soun suddenly awoke. He’d remembered Genma had told him something about Hibari and the engagement situation that seemed important. Yet for the life of him, he couldn’t remember what it had been... The only thing his brain offered was some nonsense about Ran and Hibari somehow being engaged, which made no sense.

Just thinking about how much the two of them had spent on alcohol that night gave him a headache...

* * *

Ranma and Hibari were busy doing morning stretches with Suzume, enjoying the still cool air of early morning. The black haired boy admired the young girl’s determination for perfection and idly wondered if she might be a potential student (once Ranma had finished figuring out the basics of teaching with Hibari).

“Hibari, Ranma. Telephone,” Tsugumi announced as she walked out towards the courtyard.

“Oh! Coming sis!” Hibari replied.

“We’ll finish this next time,” Ranma told Suzume while hurrying after Hibari.

The young bluenette rolled her eyes and continued her stretches. Ranma was pretty sure she’d muttered something sarcastic under her breath.

Reaching the telephone, Ranma and Hibari awkwardly tried to share the handset, and were greeted by the ancient voice of Cologne.

“There is a slight crisis with Shampoo right now... It would be quite helpful if you two came over quickly.”

Hibari was about to ask what sort of crisis when Shui’s voice was picked up in the background. “That thing is weedwacker! Keep it away! Aiya!”
Ranma and Hibari briefly shared confused looks, before Ranma spoke up to answer.

“Sure, yeah. We can come over.”

“Thank you,” Cologne replied, her voice filled with relief.

By this time of morning the Neko Hanten was generally quiet. They tended not to open until lunch afterward. Yet today crashing and yelling could be heard from within. Ranma knocked gingerly.

The door cracked open to reveal a quite tired looking Cologne. “Thank goodness. Hopefully you two can talk some sense into the child.”

“We can try, but it is Shampoo we’re talkin’ about,” Ranma grumbled. “Not like she’s easy ta work with or nothin’.”

“Just follow the crashing sounds?” Hibari asked.

Cologne let out an exasperated sigh and nodded.

The two teens steeled themselves as they moved towards the main dining area. Chairs and tables had been tossed about, leaving much of the room open. Almost directly in the middle the pair found the rather unusual sight of Shui in the process of hogtying a rather uncooperative Mousse.

Where Mousse had come from, or why he looked like he hadn’t seen the sun in a while, neither Ranma nor Hibari could guess at. His hair had grown out a little though, so he looked less comedic than when it was shaved.

“Ow, ow, ow!” Mousse yelped as Shui dug a knee into his back.

“What on earth happened here?” Hibari asked.

Shui froze at the sound of Hibari’s voice. The girl-turned-boy jumped back away from Mousse and swung round to face away from the new arrivals. “Aiyah! Tzonghi should not see I in current state. Am unpresentable.”

“Well, that’s a bit of a different response,” Ranma said, turning to give Hibari a smirk.

When the blonde responded with a shake of her head Ranma decided to back off a little. “So, where’d Mousse crawl out from anyway?”

“The basement,” Mousse answered flatly.

“Yes, I had hoped that, with my poor great-grandchild growing so concerned over their current predicament that Mousse might be able to help,” Cologne explained as she bounded into the room. “It is an issue that Shampoo had not had to deal with before the curse, and, unfortunately, my son had to return to our village as his sister-in-law has fallen ill.”

Ranma gave a slow nod, but couldn’t help feel like something important was being danced around. “What exactly’s her problem now?”

Cologne cleared her throat. “Great grandchild. Turn around.”

Shui went rigid for a moment at the sound of Cologne’s order, but slowly and reluctantly the currently handsome girl turned around. She continued to stare at the floor, but the new development
was quite obvious.

“Heh, that’s actually some pretty good stubble there, Shampoo,” Ranma laughed, leaning in to get a closer look. “I think you’ve got better facial hair genes than pops does. I’ve certainly never managed ta get that even of hair.”

The comment simply made the handsome teen blush furiously. This was not something a warrior of the Nujiezu was meant to deal with.

“So, what did you do that ticked her off so much?” Hibari asked, lightly poking Mousse with her foot.

“All I did was show her how my electric razor worked,” Mousse groaned.

Suddenly Shui placed both her hands on Ranma’s shoulders, and stared at the other handsome teen with pleading eyes. “Tongzhi Ranma knows how to shave, yes? Can show me?”

Something about the sad look in those wine coloured eyes made Ranma waver a moment. The feelings the pigtailed teen had wrestled with before the truth came out bubbled to the surface. “I... uh... I’m gonna be honest: I’m terrible at shavin’. It’s been a blessin’ that I haven’t had ta in months thanks ta Jusenkyo. Whenever I did before I’d always nick myself. Pops said I went through half our tissue paper on my shavin’ cuts.”

A look of defeat washed over Shui. “There goes last hope... must use stupid Mousse’s weedwacker.”

Hibari softly cleared her throat. “I-I could help. I certainly know how to shave without nicking myself.”

Shui’s face lit up, and the dark haired teen rushed over to lift Hibari into a bear hug. “Aire-Tongzhi! Of course! I forget you would know.”

* * *

A now smooth faced Shui hummed away while putting the dining area back in order. Seeing that bubbly personality in action again Ranma was once more struggling with confused feelings. Were the feelings that both Ukyo and Shui... no, Shampoo, stirred in Ranma’s heart really love? Neither was quite the same as how being around Hibari felt, but there were similarities for both... Why did this all have to be so complicated.

* * *

Honda Takuto sat reclined in the restaurant booth as Sanzenin finished up his description of the redhead and blonde he’d encountered some time before. Honda had heard how Sanzenin was checking around at all the other high schools of Nerima, hunting for a couple girls. What he’d heard second hand had certainly lead him to suspect who it was Sanzenin was searching for, but it was only now that he knew before.

Pausing to watch one of the cute waitresses walk past (the reason both he and Sanzenin had decided a seat near the kitchen entrance was best), Honda sat up a bit.

“Oh yes, I certainly know who the girl is that broke your poor nose that was once so loved,” Honda stated, running a comb quickly through his perfect brown hair.

“It looks exactly the same!” Mikado protested, slamming a fist on the table between them.
“Of course it does,” Takuto replied. “I also know who it is that you kissed, though I’ll have to admit that that information might not make you as happy.”

“How could I be unhappy to learn the name of that stunning little redhead? One playboy to another... she had a rack worth going on a second date for,” Mikado said.


Mikado was surprised when Honda’s two cronies appeared, the bald Yamaha Sarian hopping over the booth the land between him and the window, while the curly haired Suzuki Jenma slid in from the opposite angle. Both lads produced newspapers with similar front page stories. One headline read *Saotome! The Bi-Gendered Wonder!* and the other *Girl or Boy? Tale of the Transfer Student!*. Both were accompanied by pictures showing some black haired boy in some part of what must be Wakaba High with a bucket of water about to splash him, and then beside a picture of the gorgeous redhead sopping wet in the same location and clothing.

“I’ve seen the little trick myself,” Yamaha assured Mikado.

“Mhm, so has most of our school,” Suzuki added.

Mikado snatched up one of the papers and glared angrily at it. “What!? This... this... well, he was female when I kissed her! Him! Gah... whatever!”

“I suppose you can count Ranma as ½ a point for your score. Rather generous considering how it was I was shafted with having a ½ on my own count,” Honda replied.

Mikado was too busy seeing red to process what Honda had said. “I will have vengeance!”
The summer holidays had turned almost every day at Ucchan’s into a rush day. While there were still more girls than guys the balance did shift noticeably whenever Rie was on staff. Right now they were between meals, but the freeform schedules of teenagers unrestrained by school meant there were more than a few tables full.

Much of Ukyo’s attention was focused on the grill adjacent seats. Specifically the one seating a handsome boy with trademark pigtail and red silk shirt. Ranma was not there to flirt today, having sat quietly for quite some time (possibly lost in thought, or possibly just enjoying that Ucchan’s had a good cross breeze that kept it cool during the summer heat), but was watching Ukyo’s cooking. Feeling a bit inspired, the okonomiyaki chef had begun to get a little showier than usual, attracting attention from more than a few diners who had moved from their tables to watch the cooking.

A quick sprinkle of seaweed and tempura flakes, added with dramatic flair, finished the dish to a polite applause. Ukyo could help giving a quick smirk and a bow while handing the plate off to Rie, who ran it off to the correct table.

She was just about to start on the next order when she noticed a handsome guy who looked maybe a year or two older stroll in. Rie moved forward, nervously asking him if wanted a table or not, but he ignored her. Instead he walked up behind Ranma, a look of hatred on his face.

“You! You’re Saotome, aren’t you?” Mikado demanded.

The black haired boy spun around on the stool, and gave an air of cold rage the moment Ranma realised who this was.

“Y’know, I was kind of hoping to see ya again,” Ranma said, hatred filling the martial artist’s voice. “There was somethin’ I owed ya.”

“It better have been to give me an apology,” Mikado announced. “Galavanting around in a twisted disguise, looking like some innocent girl... deceiving a chivalrous young man such as myself.”

“CHIVALROUS!? Ucchan, hand me a glass a’ water. I want ta beat this guy to a pulp properly,” Ranma seethed, holding a hand out.

Ukyo was quick to respond, and Ranma quickly upturned the glass to transform.

“I was thinkin’ beatin’ ya up in guy mode’d hurt ya more, but this is a pretty feminine anger I’ve got,” Ranma said, before slamming into Mikado’s gut with a sucker punch.

The lithe figure-skater doubled over, shock on his face that the blow hurt as much as it did. This was followed by a burst of blows that even Ukyo had trouble following, most of the amaguriken blows hitting Mikado in his precious face. The assault had been fast enough that he’d not had time to fall over, onto his rear, until after Ranma had finished. Sanzenin opened his mouth to shout some insult, but froze in terror as he felt two teeth come loose. The horror at having his perfect smile ruined, especially after the expenses of having a plastic surgeon repair his nose, was simply too much for him. As such, Mikado promptly fainted.

“Yeesh, I was hoping to get a bit more stress relief offa beatin’ the snot outta him,” Ranma grumbled.

“W-what did he do?” Rie asked, not used to seeing Ranma look so angry.
“That’s private!” Ranma blurted, yanking Mikado’s unconscious body out towards the nearest trash pick-up site.

* * *

Hibari and Tsugumi were arriving home from grocery shopping when they caught sight a rather grumpy little redhead entering the Oozora compound just ahead of them. Hibari quickly excused herself from putting the groceries away to run up and check on Ranma.

Sliding open the divider to Ranma’s room, Hibari found the redhead pouting on the bed.

“Hey there Ranma, what’s got you so down?” Hibari asked, plopping herself down on the bed beside the pigtailed cutie.

“I ran inta San-whatever his name was. The figure skatin’ jerk. The guy didn’t even have the dignity ta let me beat him up properly before passin’ out,” Ranma replied, using a tone that almost indicated a suspicion Mikado had passed out on purpose.

Hibari nodded and thought the issue over a moment. How Ranma was in female form, and seemed be striving for cuteness (going by the redhead’s body language). Hopping to her feet and swing her face down a mere centimetre from Ranma’s.

“He insulted your femininity, didn’t he?”

“I... yeah,” Ranma sighed. “Acted like I was just doin’ it ta put on a show or somethin’. Which felt like a reminder I didn’t need that I don’t really know what I’m doin’... Or even exactly who I am.”

Hibari lightly brushed a stray strand of hair from Ranma’s face, and gave a large smile. “I think I know a good way to help with that: makeover time!”

“A makeover? Like, with makeup and everythin’?” Ranma asked, doing a bad job at hiding a bubbling sense of excitement.

“Mhm. You’re pretty good with wigs and such, but makeup and styling your actual hair seem two points you haven’t quite mastered. And you tend to overdo your outfits. So let me handle it,” Hibari declared boldly.

* * *

The girl staring back at Ranma from the mirror was just as cute and impressively feminine as the last time Hibari had snuck makeup onto her face. The way her hair flowed loose around her shoulders, held in place behind one ear with a cute heart hair clip and the fashionable outfit that was feminine, but not overstatedly so (as usually happened when Ranma came up with disguises) made her look like a quite typical high school age girl. In fact, the oversized bowtie and the quietly patterned blouse had a distinctive ‘school’ look to it, but was cute enough Ranma didn’t mind.

Confirming that the girl in the mirror’s movements did indeed copy Ranma’s own, the redhead felt more like a girl than she had since the day she’d hit her head.

Turning to Hibari with a massive smile she froze a moment, deciding that if she was going to look this girly she’d use speech to match. “Thank you! This helps... so so much.”

“It was no biggy. Like I said, I don’t get to use that purple eyeshadow enough anyway, and it looks good on you,” Hibari replied. She still prefered Ranma looking rather more butch (or fully male), but knew some days you needed to go all out when someone was being particularly obnoxious about
one’s status as a girl.

“I should go show Suzume,” Ranma said, smiling widely. The youngest Oozora was certainly a fan of Ranma modelling outfits.

“I think she’d be down in the kitchen working on homework,” Hibari said after a moment’s reflection. “She likes to ask Tsugumi for help.”

“Thanks,” Ranma replied, giving Hibari a quick hug. On some level Ranma wanted to also give the taller girl a peck on the cheek, but she still felt rather nervous when it came to being forward with affection.

Hurrying off down the stairs, Ranma heading off towards the kitchen. As she reached one of the main sitting areas she grew nervous at the sound of her father’s voice conversing with Ibari, and decided the best solution was to book it past the open doorway (hoping Genma wouldn’t notice her outfit).

Zipping forward, Ranma was definitely a blur, and Genma had been too focused on the shogi board to notice either way. Unfortunately, Ranma wasn’t very used to wearing socks, and the sight of Tsubame rounding the corner left her sliding wildly, until she slammed into the taller girl.

The pair tumbled into a pile of limbs and grumbling.

“That’s my boob, you pervert!” Tsubame hissed as she tried to extract herself. Wiggling a bit, she managed to push Ranma off her.

“Ow... you didn’t have to squish my boob as vengeance ya know,” the redhead grumbled.

“It wasn’t on purpose!” Tsubame snapped back as she stood up. After the rumours one of her friends had told her about, she was feeling a bit particularly defensive about that sort of thing... it was only then that she realised a likely cause of her latest problem. “It’s your fault, isn’t it?”

“What is?” Ranma asked, hopping to her feet and fixing her bow tie.

“The rumours I might be a lesbian.”

Ranma took a moment to figure out how on earth she could be to blame for that, before the scene in the ice cream parlour hit her. The small redhead blushed a bit at the memory. Taking the lead had been thrilling, especially with how it had caught Hibari by surprise.

“I, uh... yeah. Sorry ‘bout that,” Ranma replied with a shrug. “I’m sure they’ll stop soon enough. Just try ta talk about guys ya got a crush on, maybe?”

Tsubame’s eye twitched briefly and she crossed her arms and started to walk away. “Sure, yeah. Boys I have a crush on... umm.”

Ranma watched her go, unable to read the taller girl’s mood. Maybe a compliment would help?

“I, uh, like your haircut?” Ranma offered.

“Pardon?” the brunette asked, subconsciously touching her new short soft pageboy style.

“Girls are supposed ta complement each other’s hair and stuff, right? And short hair is cute,” the redhead replied, worrying she’d made a mistake.

“I... I just thought it was hot this summer, so wanted a trim... You’re disqualified as an option
anyway, so don’t bother flirting,” Tsubame fumed, storming off.

Ranma watched the girl storm off, feeling completely confused. Shrugging, Ranma turned and headed towards the kitchen.

Suzume and Tsugumi were in the middle of discussing something that Suzume clearly found quite important. Not wanting to interrupt, Ranma waited patiently as Tsugumi explained what was apparently some rather tricky long division. As the the sisters wrapped up, Suzume looked up, realising Ranma was there.

“So cute!” Suzume declared, forgetting her homework to run up and give Ranma a thorough inspection. “Your hair is a little messy, but the makeup is really good. Hmm... Hibari picked out the outfit, didn’t she? It’s so stylish.”

“It’s that obvious?” Ranma asked. “I thought my fashion sense was pretty good too?”

“You’re not bad, but big sis is an expert,” Suzume declared confidently.

“I can’t argue that,” Ranma replied.

“You do look very cute, Ranma,” Tsugumi added. “Since you’re here, I was wondering, could you run to the store to grab some kombu? While I was putting groceries away I realised I had less than I’d thought. Enough for breakfast, but it won’t last until the next grocery trip.”

“Sure thing,” Ranma replied, in a peppy and feminine tone. “Did I sound girly enough there?”

“Definitely,” the eldest Oozora daughter replied, trying not to giggle. Ranma’s need to go all in on (often contradictory) gender matters amused her to no end.

* * *

Ranma was on her way back from the store, lost in a debate about whether or not she could get away with skipping or not, when a voice called out.

“Miss, this wouldn’t be Tokyo, would it?”

Spinning around Ranma was left looking up at Ryoga’s confused face. Ranma braced to get yelled at, but saw no recognition in Ryoga’s eyes.

“Yes, it’s Tokyo. We’re... we’re in Suginami,” Ranma offered, wondering if Ryoga would believe it.

“Suginami... Hmm, so I’d have to cut across Arakawa and Fussa to get over to Nerima then,” Ryoga muttered to himself. “Thank you, miss.”

Seeing that Ryoga really had no clue it was Ranma, her mind realised there was an opportunity for a little vengeance here.

“You’re very muscular... are you an athlete?” the redhead asked, leaning into Ryoga’s personal space.

“I... I’m martial artist actually,” Ryoga replied nervously, unsure how to handle this attractive girl getting so close to him.

“Oooh, that’s even cooler! I bet you’ve got all sorts of girls in love with you,” Ranma said, hoping she wasn’t hamming up the schoolgirl act too much. “What a shame...”
“No! Nope, I’m totally single!” Ryoga blurted, overwhelmed by flirtation. (And starting to suspect he had a weak spot for redheads.)

“Really!? Wowie... A chance to get a real life martial artist boyfriend,” Ranma said, batting her eyelashes.

“Well, uh, y’know,” Ryoga stammered.

Ranma struggled the urge to bury her face in her palms at Ryoga’s ‘smooth’ response. It was time to resort to more direct methods.

“Y’know, there’s a little sushi place a couple blocks from here that I’ve always thought would be the most romantic place for a first date,” Ranma explained, hoping Ryoga would catch her intentions.

“That’s nice,” Ryoga replied, breaking Ranma’s cool as the smile redhead turned away a bit to silently yell in frustration. “I... wait, did you want me to go with you?”

Ranma spun around with a large, only mildly strained, smile. “Oh yes! I’d be thrilled!”

* * *

Ranma had spent the brief meal flirting shamelessly with Ryoga, in large part as that was the only level of flirting Ryoga seemed to actually process. The redhead made constant efforts to extract stories from Ryoga, both to seem like an interested date and an honest curiosity about what had happened between middle school and Ryoga showing up at Wakaba (other than Jusenkyo). She was beginning to wonder if the vengeance was going to be worth this level of effort, but reminding herself of how it felt to be dumped filled Ranma with resolve.

“I’ll pay the bill!” Ryoga declared, as Ranma finished up her second deluxe platter.

“That’ll be 3 900 yen for the sushi, and 1 600 yen for the broken plates and cups,” the chef stated flatly, holding up the glass Ryoga had been drinking out of earlier to show the chunk missing from where the fanged boy had nervously bitten it.

“S-sure. Sorry again, sir,” Ryoga replied with a quick bow, before digging through his backpack to fish out the change.

Ranma was a bit disappointed the meal was over so soon, but followed after Ryoga, not quite sure how to spring the finishing blow on him.

As the pair walked quietly, they soon found themselves at the bank of a river. Ryoga sighed, and sat down on a concrete protrusion that’s use in civil engineering Ranma couldn’t begin to guess at (but it seemed designed to be highly functional, for whatever that function was). Ryoga hadn’t made any effort to understand his seat, and instead was watching the water absently.

“Heh, I bet you can guess why I’m single now,” Ryoga muttered. “I’m just such a nervous wreck around cute girls.”

Ranma struggled to hold down a blush, and utterly failed, at being sorted honestly under the descriptor of ‘cute girl’.

Ryoga sighed, and added a half whispered thought, mostly to himself. “It’s really for the best that I’ve found out I’m probably gay...”

A flurry of confused emotions welled up inside Ranma. Part of her said this was the best moment to
strike, to ensure total victory. Part of her wanted to reassure someone she’d once considered a friend, hoping to regain that camaraderie. And yet another part wanted to take Ryoga by the collar and shake him about, demanding recognition for both her own and Hibari’s femininity.

In the end a mixed of all three approaches seemed best to Ranma. She’d deal with what the varying emotions meant later.

“I’m not sure a guy who tried broke his plate in half with his chopsticks due to nerves over a date with a girl he couldn’t stop checking out sounds very gay,” Ranma said, sliding up next to Ryoga. “If you want to go on another date or three whenever we cross paths again on your nomadic lifestyle, we could maybe test things a little further?”

Ranma began to blush once she realised what she’d just said. The redhead internally insisted that further dates were both just to make the victory all that more total in the end, when the reveal was made... and also, an effort to enjoy hanging out with Ryoga in a situation where he wasn’t feeling murderous.

Those two goals were deeply contradictory, but for now Ranma could postpone having to choose.

“I... really? I’d like that,” Ryoga replied happily as he turned and grabbed Ranma’s small hand. “Thank you... I don’t even know your name! How did I not ask that.”

“Oh... Yoiko,” Ranma replied with the first name to pop in her head. “Fujinami Yoiko.”

Ryoga smiled gently, “What a lovely name.”

His puppy dog eyes. That soft expression. His muscular frame... Ranma soon found herself blushing.

“I would love to stay, but, my mum would probably get worried about me if I’m gone much longer. I hope to see you again soon!” Ranma announced as she hopped to her feet. She gave a quick wave before running off.

Once she’d made sure there was a good distance between the two of them Ranma lightly rapped herself on the head with her knuckles. “Good work Saotome... what on earth are ya thinkin’... I guess it’s no surprise. I know I was basically his boyfriend in middle school... gah!”

Ranma slumped her small frame against a property wall and let out a sigh, before a realisation struck. “Hibari does prefer boys overall though... if we’re gonna bring anyone else in, he might be her top choice... Bleh. We should just stick to the two of us. That’s how normal people do it, ain’t it?”

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“Is everything okay?” Tsugumi asked as Ranma handed her the packet of kombu. “You took quite a while. Hibari already started hi-her homework.”


***

Ranma spat out the bit of grass that landing face first into the dirt generally left lodged in one’s mouth. It was a bit embarrassing that Genma had managed to land such a good blow, but Ranma did have a number of distractions on the mind.

The black haired teen was ready to stand up and continue the fight, when a certain little piglet wandered into view. That filled Ranma with more confusion, but also a determination to show off,
and so the pigtailed teen sprung to standing position in one fluid motion.

Swinging around with a roundhouse kick, Ranma caught a charging Genma off guard. The younger Saotome then pressed the advantage with a flurry of rapid strikes, leading the elder up onto the stone bridge that crossed the koi pond. A well placed leg sweep left Genma tumbling from the bridge and into the water below.

Unfortunately the splash from Genma was large enough that Ranma was soaked as well.

Still, glad to have won, Ranma turned to see if the piglet had watched that little display... only to find him looking the opposite direction and munching away on some food Suzume had brought out on a plate.

The redhead let out a sigh, and walked over to grab one of the towels sitting not far from Suzume and her pet. The young girl seemed deeply content to give the pig a scratch behind the ear and tell him how worried she’d been. Patting away water, a thought occurred to Ranma.

“What’s with the name ‘Co-chan’ anyhow?”

“I was reading through one of big sis’s books... I think it was an art book,” Suzume replied, pausing a bit to make sure she had the facts straight. “I saw that the French word for pig is *cochon*, and thought it sounded cute and close to co-chan.”

“Huh, that makes sense.”

Suzume gave a proud smile, before scooping up Co-chan and running off with him. Ranma didn’t quite hear what the girl was explaining, but couldn’t help smiling at her childish innocence. In a good mood Suzume was adorable... honestly, in a bad mood her little grumpiness was cute too.

“Sadly, it doesn’t work as well as she thinks it does,” Tsugumi said, stepping out from the kitchen nearby. “The ‘cho’ in French is more of a ‘sho’ sound... but she was so proud of her little pun, I didn’t have the heart to tell her.”

Ranma tried to stifle a giggle, and mostly failed. The redhead was about to ask if Tsugumi needed any help with setting up lunch, when Ibari’s voice bellowed out from down the hall.

“Soatome! Why didn’t you tell me about your friend Tendo’s new position on the city council?”

“I hadn’t heard yet myself,” Genma’s sign protested.

“Oh-ho, I guess I just have ears in the right places. I should invite him over for a party! He’s got some girls doesn’t he? Maybe we should invite them over too,” Ibari mused, stroking his large chin in thought. “Mhm, have a proper family meet up. Oh! Ranma, there you are. What are Tendo’s girls like? Do you think they’d get along well with my daughters?”

Ranma offered a nervous shrug. “Probably for most of ‘em?”

Ibari was practically beaming. “Excellent! Soatome, you should phone him up, see what day works for him.”
#I’ll see what I can do.# Genma offered.
Genma fiddle with the phone cord as he listened to the ringing sound. He still wasn’t sure what he was going to say. ‘Hey, Tendo, you know that yakuza boss I got myself indebted too? He wants you and your daughters to come visit, so he can try to get access to your new found political power’? It was a terrible idea.

Staring down the traditionally decorated hallway of the Oozora home, Genma did wonder if he could try to distract them into talking architecture and interior design should the meeting somehow happened. Soun’s tastes had always been similarly old fashioned after all.

“Hello, Tendo residence. For issues concerning dojo challenges, please press one, otherwise stay on the line,” a cold feminine voice said. The hint of sarcasm was not lost on Genma, and he strongly suspected that Nabiki would hang up on anyone who pressed a key... assuming they had a push-button phone at all. (The Oozoras had kept to a rotary design still, after all.)

“It’s Saotome, could I speak to your father?” Genma asked.

“Oh, yeah,” Nabiki replied, before turning away from the phone a bit to shout for her father. (In Genma’s opinion, she did not turn away nearly enough, and he was left gritting his teeth at the volume of her yelling.)

A quiet thunk indicated the cold girl had put the receiver down and no doubt wandered off, not bothering to wait for her father to arrive. It was annoying, but Genma felt he was in no place to comment as he glanced over to the living room and saw his currently very female son letting Hibari and Suzume play with hair braiding techniques.

“Hello?” Soun asked.

“Tendo-kun, it’s Saotome... it would seem that Oozora’s heard about your new job. Before I did, I might add,” Genma said.

“I... yes. About that, you see, with the new position, I’m a little worried our usual meeting up might be seen in a poor light, considering your accommodations. I’ve been handed this honour, and I’d really rather not mishandle the role;” Soun explained. “I hope you understand.”

“Of course,” Genma began.

“There’s no need to worry my good man,” Ibai’s voice declared (apparently having been listening from another telephone somewhere in the Oozora home). “Kurimoto and Ogata are old friends of mine. Nishimura and Ishawata might give you a little trouble, but that’s just because they’re friends of Koinobori’s, and Furinkan is on the border of our territories. Don’t worry though, the Koinobori’s gang are decent folks, generally our spats with them are just a bit of graffiti and vandalising each other’s cars.”

“I... pardon?” Soun asked.

“You did know that it’s generally expected you’ll have some Yakuza contacts, no? Did they not get to that part of the orientation? Should be one of the first things... it’s such an important and mutually beneficial arrangement,” Ibai explained. “Saotome certainly holds you in high regard, so I hope we can get a business partnership up and running.”

Soun paused a bit, his desperately wracking his brain in an attempt to find any excuse to avoid this
was almost audible. In the end he let out a soft sigh of defeat, “Alright, I’ll meet with you. However, I don’t feel safe having my girls visiting your... compound. I would like for them to stay home.”

“I suppose that is understandable. I would certainly do my best to keep my girls safe as well,” Ibari replied, sounding rather disappointed. At least until inspiration struck. “I know! How about Ranma and my kids visit with your daughters while you visit me? After all, half this meeting is about having the kids get to know each other. We can drop them off in the car that comes around to pick you up.”

“That... that’s reasonable,” Soun admitted. “I suppose the day after tomorrow could work... if that’s alright?”

“Sounds good,” Ibari replied with a jovial chuckle.

* * *

Co-chan had a simple objective: find the bathroom. Well, most specifically the bath. He was pretty sure there were a couple of washrooms around without baths in the Oozora complex. Currently his investigation of the third floor wasn’t turning up any leads.

Pausing to try and figure out where to try next, he suddenly felt himself lifted off the floor to the sound of feminine giggling behind him. The height ruled out Suzume, and the way he was being swung about surely ruled out Tsugumi (probably Tsubame as well? He was fairly certain she’d never trust the idea of touching a pig anyhow). This of course left two options... one of whom he wanted to bite and the other he wanted to confess his love to.

It was infuriating that he couldn’t figure it out. Surely he should be able to tell his nemesis from the one he loved... or at least one of the ones he loved. That Yoiko girl had been cute.

Co-chan shook his head. Right now he would focus on Hibari. Stick to the target that was before him.

Confident in his decisions, the piglet was shocked to find himself dangling over a tub of warm water. Suddenly he was plunged into it.

As the transformation warred with anyone’s natural instinct to flail a little as they’re plunged under water, Ryoga was, for a split second, almost frightening to behold with limbs flailing about whilst growing longer. Panting a little as he surfaced, he turned to see who he was dealing with.

Hibari’s face glaring at him instantly made him worried. Sure, they’d not parted on the best terms, but he wanted to make up for it.

“What are you doing back here?” she asked, making sure he saw the way she was taking in his nude and muscular form.

“I... I came to apologise for running off. And, I, uh... I...” Ryoga began, before the gears in his brain ground to a halt. Hibari was too cute, and that mischievous glint in her eyes... there was no denying that he was head over heels for her. (Blonde or red haired.)

“If you’ve come to win me over, I’m sorry, but you’re too late. Ranma’s come to her senses and stopped pretending not to like me,” Hibari informed him.

Ryoga shot up to his feet, adrenaline pumping through his veins as the feeling of losing to Ranma overwhelmed him. “I... I’ll prove I’m better! I... give me two weeks, and I’ll... I’ll beat him in a martial arts match. Yeah!”
Hibari was rather distracted for a moment by what currently filled her frame of view. “So you are trying to compensate.”

Ryoga went bright red and dropped back into the water and tried to desperately regain some modesty. Hibari meanwhile was on the floor in hysteric.

“Oh man, your face... that was too precious,” Hibari finally said, sitting up and wiping tears from her eyes. “Seriously though, how does beating Ranma in a fight fix your issue? If someone beat me up, would you suddenly want to date them?”

Ryoga’s response died in his throat as he realised he really hadn’t thought that far ahead... “I... it’s part of proving myself to you. Showing I can be better. Um... I’ll buy you a gift too!”

Hibari leaned in towards Ryoga’s personal space, her nose practically brushing against his as she smiled. “You’re cute, but hopeless. Ranma would probably want to accept your challenge though, so I’ll pass it on. But I choose who my heart belongs to. I’m not some prize to be tossed about. Understood?”

Ryoga nodded nervously. Well, tried to nod without moving his head, for fear of either accidentally kissing or headbutting Hibari she was so close.

The blonde smiled and stood up. “Well, I’ve got things to do. Please don’t get too beat up when the fight does roll around, Suzume does love her little pet so.”

Ryoga nodded and watched Hibari leave. After a few moments he climbed out of the tub, only to realise his clothes were probably halfway across the compound. Sighing, he turned on the cold water.

* * *

Ranma relaxed and listened to the deep calming sound of Hibari’s playing the bass. It was a great way to start the day. The black haired teen wasn’t sure, but this piece sounded a bit different from what Hibari usually played. Older somehow. Certainly way more complex than anything she’d been showing Ranma, even if they’d at last moved on to having the pigtailed teen try to play an actual song.

Her suddenly coming to a halt threw Ranma from the musically induced calm.

“Bleh. Bach always messes me up,” Hibari grumbled. “Not even sure why I bother, it’s not like I plan to go pro...”

“The drive to be the best you can be?” Ranma offered.

“Hmm... probably the drive to master something my dad thought would be a manly skill, and remaining feminine while doing it,” Hibari replied, after taking a moment to honestly think it over.

Ranma smiled, in those moments where Hibari became lost in thought she looked so cute. And Ranma was definitely beginning to understand that line of thought. Hibari flipped through her music book for a moment, humming the tune quietly as she tried to get the feel for it.

“You know, I haven’t actually heard you sing,” Hibari said suddenly. “We should go to karaoke sometime, I’m curious what your singing voice is like... or singing voices, I suppose.”

“Well, I ain’t really had any proper trainin’,” Ranma protested. “Closest thing was probably when I was a kid and-”
“Nihao!” Shui declared, nearly unhinging the door as she shoved it open. The handsome (currently) male teen was once more dressed interestingly, with a beret, an oversized blue sports jersey for a team neither Ranma nor Hibari recognised (truth be told, Shui didn’t either), and the skinny jeans+combat boots Shui seemed to always wear. “Good news! Jusenkyo merchant is back in town! Well... back in Yokohama, but that is basically ‘town’.”

The other two just stared at the cursed girl for a moment.

“Did someone let you in, or...?” Hibari asked. They hadn’t even had breakfast yet.

“Oh yes. Tsugumi is very nice. She said she will even make me some breakfast too, since I came here so early,” Shui declared happily. “But we should hurry. Cologne not taking time off to drive, so have to go by train. That takes so long... So right after breakfast, we go, yes?”

“I’d like to grab a bath after we eat, but then we can set out,” Hibari replied.

* * *

The train ride was long, yet both Ranma and Shui were distracted the whole time. There was just so much to see from the elevated Tokyo area rail lines. Their childlike wonder caused more than a few disparaging remarks from other passengers that ‘boys their age should be more mature’, but Hibari thought they were both exceptionally cute.

As the pair got excited for the ocean coming into view, Hibari smiled gently. She felt so lucky at that moment to have both of these pure and cheerful cuties that it took her a moment to realise she was thinking of Shui as ‘hers’ too.

‘No, no, no,’ Hibari silently chastised herself. ‘Shampoo’s a girl. If I show a hint of attraction now... dad will find a way to get us married by dinner, and Ranma will probably be shackled to Tsubame or something.’

“Tongzhi is okay, yes?” Shui asked, their faces mere centimetres apart.

“Bwah!” Hibari blurted, slipping back and nearly falling from her seat. “I’m fine! I’m fine... just lost in thought. Excited about what we’re buying and all that.”

“I bet there’s so much good food to be had too,” Ranma chimed in, wearing that innocent smile Hibari tended to more associate with girl mode than Ranma’s current form.

“Is almost all southern food though,” Shui replied dismissively. “Too sweet and light.”

“Still, be fun to sample either way,” Ranma said absently as the numerous cranes of the Minato Mirai 21 project came into sight.

“The first stop is the Jusenkyo merchant though,” Hibari stated, “We get Shampoo back to her proper self before we worry about anything else.”

“Well, yeah,” Ranma replied, though there was clearly a little bit of apprehension in the black haired boy’s voice. ‘Shui’ s face was that of a friend, while Shampoo’s birth face was one Ranma still associated with being hunted across China, a distinction that left Ranma a bit nervous about seeing that latter again.

Their stop being next hammered home that Ranma didn’t have much longer to put it off.

Ishikawacho station proved rather large and felt briefly intimidating, but Ranma could tell Shui knew
their route well enough, so fell in step behind the cursed girl. Once out on the street, the pigtailed boy was struck by how claustrophobic the area felt, being surrounded by elevated highways, one of which passed right over the exit they used from the station.

There was no question about whether they were on the right path or not though, as a traditional Chinese style arch beckoned them mere steps from the station. That first arch was merely for direction however, as they walked a bit further down a typical Japanese urban street that led to a surprisingly open bit of city once they escaped the complicated mess of highways and overpasses.

Another arch greeted them a minute or two later, this one mean to mark the entrance to Chinatown. It left Ranma rather unimpressed, as the path they’d taken led onto a quiet residential street. Ranma was left waiting for a grand entrance, and barely noticed as the energy and chaos of the area grew gradually, until suddenly the young Saotome realised the surrounding signs were predominantly in Chinese (and crammed into every available space as it felt like every doorway led to three different shops).

“I hope am not dragged into any politics arguments today,” Shui sighed as the sound of yelling in Cantonese mixed in with Japanese more and more.

“Why would you get dragged into arguments?” Ranma asked, trying to ignore the allure of cooking food coming from a nearby restaurant.

“Accent. Especially in Mandarin. Many here think am some sort of Communist type,” Shui said, while clearly trying to remember directions at this intersection.

“You do like to toss around tongzhi a lot,” Hibari noted.

“Yes, but is Hong Kong meaning, not Communist meaning,” Shui replied, wiping off some sweat and setting off again down a street that somehow held more signs than the last one.

“Hong Kong meaning?” Ranma and Hibari asked in unison.

The cursed girl stopped dead in her tracks and turned to the other two. “Aiya! You mean you not know? Thought at least tongzhi Hibari would know. Is term to mean close to ‘fellow gay’, as cheeky slang. Was meant to help flirting, show am ‘boy’ who like boys ‘too’... Of course, think now we three more girl who like girls.”

“I like boys plenty,” Hibari declared defensively as she followed Shui onto a small side street.

“Same... I think,” Ranma added while sidestepping to avoid an inconveniently placed sign. The black haired teen certainly enjoyed the view that Shampoo’s cursed form provided. (And then there was the confusion with Ryoga...)

“Girls who like both?” Shui offered, gaining a nod from Hibari.

“Both...” Ranma muttered, just barely audible. The idea of liking both guys and girls seemed straightforward enough, but that left Ranma wondering: why could you like both, but only be allowed to be one or the other?

“Just down here,” Shui said, pointing to an alleyway covered over by balconies on either side that nearly touched in the middle (despite their small size).

“Looks like the location of a legitimate business,” Hibari replied sarcastically.

Ranma followed after the other two, nervous that a leaky external pipe was going to break as they
walked under. With two people carrying Jusenkyo curses walking next to it, the black haired boy was convinced the pipe breaking was inevitable, and quietly prayed it was filled with cold water. One only had to look at how damp Shui’s shirt was with sweat to remember the cursed girl was dealing with the heat sensitivity from the Cat’s Tongue.

Exiting the constricting still air of the alleyway, Shui stepped forward and rapped on a rusted iron door. The trio waited quietly, listening for a sound of life from within. Shui apparently lost patience after a few seconds and the dark haired teen began knocking with more force. Both Ranma and Hibari began to worry the door would come off its hinges when an eye slit slid open.

A gruff male voice was almost certainly complaining in Mandarin from behind the door, but whoever he was stopped upon realising who it was that was pounding away. Ranma briefly heard Shampoo’s name, and grasped a couple of other words that indicated the man was concerned about Shui’s current state.

“I am here for Phoenix Pill and a couple other items,” Shui replied in calm Japanese.

“Another Phoenix pill? Did that fiancé cause more trouble? Or... wait, had two of them, no?” the man replied, before glancing over Shui’s shoulder and spotting Hibari and Ranma (both of whom waved nervously). “That them? Jusenkyo certainly generous to make him that cute.”

Hibari couldn’t help but give Ranma a confident smirk.

“Engagement... is on hold,” Shui replied, “And Phoenix Pill is for self.”

“Wèile nǐ? Bùxìng de nǚhái... I give you 20% discount. Girl as cute as Shampoo should not be stuck living as boy!” the man declared. “Come in! Come in!”

The door creaked open, releasing a pungent mixture of unidentifiable smells (and body odour). Hibari braced herself as she walked forward, though Shui and Ranma were rather more used to these sorts of smells.

For unclear reasons the room was illuminated by purplish red lights usually used for photography dark rooms. Hibari hoped it was to preserve potions or whatever that might be photosensitive, but was far from confident in her assessment. She decided to focus on finding the instant Nyannichuan, and leave everything else up to the others.

Ranma meanwhile had decided to just generally browse and see what sort of creepy or gross things might be in the various jars filling the shelves of the ‘store’. Well, that was the original plan, but then the pigtailed teen spotted a small selection of Qinghai specific snacks. Ranma had no idea what was in any of it, but the little cookie things shaped like stars were delicious and Ranma had been craving them a few times since getting back to Japan.

“What tongzhī doing with Tu cat treats?” Shui asked, while holding the small ornate envelope that contained the Phoenix Pill.

“C-cat treats? Really?” Ranma asked, feeling both embarrassed and a bit mad at Genma for having given them as a snack during the trip.

“Mhm. Though, if being honest, they are surprisingly tasty. I always eat them as little girl,” Shui replied with a conspiratorial whisper. “No idea what in them, though think there mint.”

“Can I get a bulk discount on these?” Hibari asked, holding up a box of instant Nyannichuan packets.
The sweaty middle aged merchant, with his obviously too small Mao jacket and receding hairline, gave out a chuckle. “Looking to cause mischief are we? Small discount only. 5%.”

“5%? Really?” Hibari replied as she began to give her best puppy dog eyes. “My dad doesn’t give me much of an allowance. I’ve had to really save to have the money to buy this. I’m not quite sure I can cover it all with just 5%.”

The man chuckled. “You’re really making use of that curse. Sadly, cute routine doesn’t work on those who know truth.”

“Uh, she’s not the one with the curse,” Ranma said, “That’s me. I can prove it with a glass of water, if you need me to?”

“Is true!” Shui added.

The man paled a bit (or perhaps a lot, it was hard to tell in this dim red lighting). “Not... that very cruel! And sorry miss! Give 10% discount as apology!”

Hibari replied with a massive grin. The trio piled up their purchases (Hibari deciding to add in a few packets of Nannichuan too, sure they’d have a use of some kind), and handed over the yen cover it all. Hibari and Shui were both skipping as they left the shop. Ranma hurried after as the two girls hunted for a washroom to change in.

* * *

“How the heck am I going to beat Ranma,” Ryoga muttered to himself as he paced back and forth in the alleyway behind the Oozora compound. “I couldn’t land a hit last time, and he was exhausted... I need some kind of intensive training.”

“Um, if you’re going to stand in front of our restau-” Mousse began, having been sent by Cologne to get rid of this emotional loiterer.

“Saotome Ranma! I don’t know how, but I will defeat you!” Ryoga shouted, not noticing Mousse until he’d shouted. Looking around he realised he definitely was not in the alleyway anymore.

“Uh, hey there?”

“You’re an enemy of Saotome?” Mousse asked.

“...Yes?” Ryoga replied nervously. He had no idea who this guy was, or what he thought of Ranma, but... that pigtailed teen did seem better at finding enemies than finding friends, so Ryoga hoped for the best.

“I think we can come to a mutually beneficial arrangement,” Mousse replied with an unsettlingly large grin. (Maybe Shampoo had demanded that he not intervene in matters, but if he helped someone else mess things up... that was obviously a different matter altogether.)

* * *

“Aahhh... that feels good,” Shampoo sighed as she felt the hot water running down her body.

Ranma and Hibari both felt a bit flustered at the sheer ecstasy in Shampoo’s voice as they stood crammed into the public washroom of a small (and currently very dead) Cantonese restaurant. Ranma felt a brief moment of fear as Shampoo turned to smile at the others, but she looked so adorable in the beret and (now even more) oversized jersey that Ranma was too distracted by cute to fear her.
“Now tongzhi Hibari change?” Shampoo asked, leaning into the blonde’s personal space.

In the dim and flickering fluorescent lighting the shadows looked surprisingly artistic on the Nujiezu girl’s face, and for a moment Hibari felt oddly hypnotised by the way the shifting light played on Shampoo’s delicate features. Something about the strong lighting was emphasising how Shampoo’s female features were quite close to those of her cursed face, only softer. And Hibari was rather fond of Shampoo’s male form...

“Of course,” Hibari half whispered.

Shampoo slid out of the way, breaking the brief moment of surreal hypnotism. Hibari pulled one of the sachets out from her bag and mixed it with cool water in the bottle Shampoo had just used. Once all the powder had thoroughly dissolved, the blonde upturned the bottle on her head, and shivered at the tingling of the transformation.

“Mmmhm... that is nice,” Hibari said, unintentionally causing Ranma to become a blushing mess once more by expressing just as much joy as Shampoo had.

Shampoo herself was also blushing a little, still feeling a bit guilty about expressing her interest in girls while in her birth form.

“Uhh... should I change too while we’re at it?” Ranma asked, growing even more flustered as Hibari unbuttoned her shirt to remove the now unnecessary padding.

“It could be fun to have a girls’ day out,” Hibari replied, turning a bit to face her fiancé (and not bothering to button her shirt back up quite yet). “But I like the view either way.”

Ranma looked nervously at the two girls, before giving a defeated shrug. “Eh, Hibari, you’re always telling me to go with the flow. If I get splashed, I get splashed. If I don’t, I don’t.”

“Sounds like a plan. Oh, and while we’re here, I also want to visit Motomachi. I hear they’ve got some otherwise hard to find foreign albums and clothes,” Hibari replied.

* * *

For once Ranma was quite satiated, having gotten to try a wide range of foods as they’d meandered across Chinatown. Now they’d moved on to the main shopping street of Motomachi, having crossed over the river and under the highway that separated the two districts. Hibari was carrying a stuffed pink panda with a bow, which she insisted was a gift for Genma (while Shampoo was loaded up with bags, having picked up at least one thing at practically every shop in Chinatown).

As they walked through Motomachi, Ranma was struck by how this area felt just as foreign as the Chinatown had... perhaps more foreign, as the dominant influence being European. Ranma hadn’t been, but could only guess that this was what a modern shopping street in France or Switzerland looked like. Even the writing had switched, from the kanji and full on Chinese of Chinatown to a sea of romanji with English and other languages thrown in (French seemed the next most common, but that may have just been Ranma’s slight familiarity with the language thanks to lessons at the Chardin’s).

“Ooh, this belt would go perfect with jersey! Help sell the ‘is now a dress’ look,” Shampoo announced, picking up an elastic belt from one store’s open air display rack.

It was only now that Ranma realised the blue haired girl had, at some point, removed the skinny jeans she was wearing before. Luckily her shirt reached mid-thigh and preserved her modesty, but Ranma was left wondering if Shampoo would have really cared that much.
Hibari began browsing the little shop and its European wares, and lit up as she produced a beret and placed it on her head. “Heh, look. We match.”

The new hat, in Ranma’s opinion, looked very nice with Hibari’s outfit of overalls and striped orange and white shirt. Very ‘artist’ was Ranma’s best description.

“Beret looks very good on you,” Shampoo replied, a light flutter of her eyelashes prompting Hibari to remember the other girl’s romantic interests. “We should get Ranma one too!”

“I don’t tend ta wear many hats,” Ranma replied, a bit unsure. The glances from some of the other shoppers was also making the teen feel a bit awkward. Maybe girl mode would have been better... three girls shopping would have attracted less speculation than Ranma was sure they were receiving now.

Did people think Ranma was a brother or cousin? Maybe a gay friend? Dating both of them? Somehow the latter felt the most likely to be drawing stares... and yet Ranma wasn’t sure if that option was exactly wrong. It definitely felt like a date from Hibari, though Ranma couldn’t tell if Shampoo was a slightly awkward third wheel or on the date with them.

“Oooh! It’s reversible. Red and black. That’s perfect,” Hibari announced, lifting up a new beret and placing it (red side out) on Ranma’s head.

Looking in a nearby mirror Ranma felt a little self conscious. “This seems kind of more of a girl mode hat. I mean, it is a women’s clothing store.”

“It’s a hat,” Hibari replied with a shrug. “Any decisions about it being ‘for girls’ or ‘for boys’ is just people adding pointless nonsense to bits of fabric. If you like it, you like it.”

Ranma decided to fix the beret a little, and turned to look in the mirror from a different angle. The floppy fabric would definitely look cuter on the smaller version of Ranma, but... why couldn’t Ranma dress a bit more fun in boy mode?

“Y’know what, you’re right. Let’s get it,” Ranma said, smiling at Hibari.

“Of course I’m right. I’m always right,” the redhead declared confidently as she grabbed the hat off Ranma to pay. She got a couple steps towards the cash before stopping and turning to Shampoo. “I’ll pay for the belt too. I’m guessing you’re a bit short on cash after buying half of Chinatown, aren’t you Shammy?”

“Aiyah! Really? Thank you!” Shampoo replied, beaming as she bounded over and tackle Hibari with a hug. After a moment of holding Hibari in an iron grip she looked up and gave a slightly awkward smile. “This is, of course, platonic hug.”

“Of course,” Hibari gasped. “Being able to breathe would be nice though.”

* * *

Tsubame sat at her desk, working on her summer homework, and enjoying the (relative) peace and quiet that came when Hibari left the house. The one good thing she felt Ranma’s arrival had brought was that Hibari spent a lot more time out of her hair (the blonde having been a bit of a home body before).

Then Tsubame’s bedroom door slammed open.

“Hey! Sis! Guess who’s a redhead again?” Hibari shouted.
Tsubame let her forehead fall onto her desk in frustration. “Owww....”

The pain in her forehead almost kept Tsubame too distracted to notice the sound of Hibari opening her closet and rifling about.

“What are you doing now you little per-”

“Remember our agreement,” Hibari cut her off, pointing a finger at her sister while still sifting through clothing with her free hand. “And then explain what’s perverted about a sister looking to borrow your clothing.”

“A-at least ask permission first!” Tsubame yelled.

Hibari pulled a shirt off a hanger and turned to her brown haired sister with an unimpressed stare. “I don’t remember you asking to borrow this.”

“I-uh, it probably got mixed up during laundry!” Tsubame protested.

“Well, if you’re not going to let me borrow anything for tomorrow, maybe I’ll go through and find out all the other things that got ‘mixed up during laundry’, eh?” Hibari shot back.

“Oh? Then let’s check your closet for my stuff too!” Tsubame fumed.

An exasperated Tsugumi appeared at the doorway. “Don’t you two start again. It’s too hot, uncle Genma’s been trying to get advice on diplomacy from me all day, and I think Shampoo is trying to convince our other redhead that she’s a good CPR teacher. I’m not dealing with you two arguing too.”

“Wait, what!?” Hibari shouted before running downstairs.

After checking several rooms she found Shampoo, Ranma, and Suzume in the living room sitting around... a CPR training dummy?

“Oh! Tongzhi Hibari, you want CPR training too? Jusenkyo guide teach when little as part of Beijing outreach program. Is very useful knowledge,” Shampoo asked cheerfully.

“I, uh... sure, yeah,” Hibari muttered.
Cologne sat quietly in the Neko Hanten kitchen late at night, going over her notes on the day’s interviews. With her grandson back in China for the immediate future, and adding in how Shampoo kept running off to spend time with the fiancés... Cologne needed at least two more waitstaff. Probably a separate delivery person, knowing how lazy foreigners tended to be. The crop so far had tended towards mediocre.

“Elder Cologne,” Mousse began, as he entered the room bowing. “I… I need to cash in my vacation days for the next little while. I have run into an ally—I mean friend. An old friend. Want to just relax and see some sights while he’s in Japan, you know?”

Cologne looked up at the buzz cut boy, her ancient eyes judging him. “Mouse, you’re not an employee. I don’t pay you. We just give you things to do, since you refuse to leave. Go. Have fun with whatever hair brained scheme you’ve thought up.”

“Thank you, elder!” the bespectacled teen replied, grinning from ear to ear.

Cologne just shook her head as the boy all but skipped from the room. Maybe he’d find another girl to annoy one of these days, and leave poor Shampoo alone. Cologne certainly couldn’t support his efforts after seeing how he reacted to Shampoo’s curse... not that she’d had much respect left for him before.

* * *

The trip to the Tendos’ was, as with most Oozora car rides, a crowded affair. Sabu was driving, while Tsugumi sat in the passenger seat (a number of tupperware containers on her lap as she felt the need to make up for the Tendos having to feed five extra mouths on such short notice). That was the calm part of the car.

The back seat was rather more chaotic: Ranma was in male form on one side, Suzume sat in the middle seat but was trying to lean across Tsubame (who sat on her other side) to look out the window. Meanwhile Hibari had plopped herself down on Ranma’s lap, somehow managing to lean seductively against her fiancé (wiggling from time to time, which kept a blush on Ranma’s cheeks).

“I still can’t believe you’re making me keep up this stupid lie,” Tsubame fumed, ruffling her short brown hair a little in frustration.

“Akane doesn’t like guys, but seems to kind of idolise ‘Ran’, so we’re trying to work it out delicately,” Hibari replied.

“Gee, yeah... when the truth comes out she’ll totally trust guys more,” the brunette grumbled.

“Can we just have peace for the evening?” Tsugumi asked, letting out a sigh. “We’re going to be guests, and we’ve been entrusted to represent our family’s honourable nature.”

“Pfft... I think we lost our last scrap of family honour when Hibari and Ranma got engaged. Those two... you knows. It’s just wrong,” Tsubame replied (struggling not to break that promise to refer to Hibari as ‘sister’), only to find herself bonked on the head by Suzume.

“You’re such a dummy sometimes, Tsubame,” the little bluenette stated grumpily as she crossed her arms and stared out ahead through the front window.
“We’re here,” Sabu announced, sounding rather relieved he’d be escaping the conversation.

The car came to a stop in front of the well kept dojo, and Tsubame was out nearly as soon as they’d stopped moving to take in some calming breaths. Suzume scrambled out after her, while Sabu hopped out and hurried around to open the door for Tsugumi. Ranma had popped open the door, but was a bit distracted by Hibari’s decision that it was time for a kiss.

After just long enough to make the others wonder what was taking them, Hibari broke the embrace and gave Ranma a smirk and a wink before hopping out of the car. The pigtailed boy took a moment to recover from the surprise, but soon followed.

The four sisters and Ranma lined themselves up just inside the front gate, Tsugumi handing off containers to the others, while Sabu knocked on the door. All of them were dressed well, though Ranma felt worried about how to make a second first impression. How much was reasonable for ‘Ranma’ to have been told by ‘Ran’? The pigtailed teen had no idea, and so decided to go with the ‘wing it and hope for the best’ strategy.

Sabu knocked at the door, hoping to get his portion of this all done with as soon as possible.

“Hello,” Soun answered nervously as he slid the door open. Glancing over at the cool expression on Sabu’s face he grew a bit nervous. The man’s whole appearance screamed ‘Yakuza’.

“Hello, we would like to thank you for having us in your home,” Tsugumi said softly, as she bowed slightly and smiled. “We hope your meeting with our father goes well.”

Soun visibly calmed at Tsugumi’s reassuring tone and gentle body language. Looking the others over he was struck by how innocent they all looked. Apparently Hibari was not the sole good child of a rough family. His own family was behind him, and clearly Akane and Nabiki had grown impatient to see the new arrivals as their heads popped out from around the door frame.

“Hibari! It’s good to see you,” Akane said happily, before scanning the group in search of her other friend. “Where’s Ran?”

“Uh... she had, uh... that time of the month?” Ranma offered awkwardly, blushing as soon it was said.

Nabiki struggled not to laugh at the odd responses. Hibari stared at Ranma like the boy had just sprouted horns. The smallest girl looked surprised and a bit confused. The taller older one gave a strained smile. And the brunette began to hack and cough (seemingly having choked a bit on her own saliva). Nabiki supposed it was a bit tactless of the boy to put things that bluntly, but still... the response seemed a little overly dramatic to her.

“Oh... poor Ran,” Akane replied, oblivious to most of the responses. She did notice the short haired sister’s coughing at least (though had no clue as to the cause). “And are you okay... um?”

“Tsubame,” the brunette replied as she recovered from the coughing fit. “I’m fine.”

“Yes, well, we men should get going,” Sabu offered. “Er, not to disparage Ranma’s masculinity... he’s, uh, still in his youth... that’s what I mean.”

“I suppose so,” Soun replied softly (not noticing Sabu’s odd explanation), turning to give his home a once over as if he half expected never to return. “Goodbye girls. And Kousaku. I hope I should be back tonight.”

Kasumi appeared at the door frame as well to wave her father off, Kousaku appearing a moment later
to wave as well. Once Sabu had driven off with Soun, it was ‘just’ the 9 of them.

“Since I’ve met everyone already, I’ll take the lead on introductions,” Hibari announced. “In the Oozora corner we’ve got Tsugumi, age 20. Tsubame, age 17. And the fierce little Suzume, age 9. As well as yours truly, of course; age 15. With special appearance by Saotome Ranma, age 16.”

Tsugumi, Ranma, and Tsubame gave simple, polite, bows at their introductions. Suzume gave a big grin and waved, before remembering she should probably bow too.

“It is a pleasure to meet you all,” Kasumi replied, with a gentle smile. “Kasumi, age 19.”

“Nabiki. 17.”

“Akane, 16. Good to meet you all.”

“Uh, Sakamoto Kousaku. Also 16.”

“Now please, come in, come in,” Kasumi said, waving the guests in. “Does any of the food you brought need to be refrigerated? Or heated?”

“One or two salads should probably be refrigerated, depending on how soon people will want them. I did bring some hors d'oeuvres. Wasn’t sure if you’d had time to get any,” Tsugumi replied.

“I have a few snacks, but I’m sure more will be appreciated,” Kasumi said. “If you would all follow me to the kitchen.”

* * *

Freed of her duty as tupperware mule, Suzume hurried off towards the living room. She’d spotted a TV from the hallway and, since everyone else was so much older than her, the little blue haired girl was hopeful she could engage in a bit of anime watching. As she decided to search around a bit to see if the Tendo’s had a remote control, a picture up on the butsudan caught Suzume’s eye.

Staring up, the woman with blueish hair looked very pretty, but also sad (in Suzume’s opinion). As the small girl noticed Akane enter the room, she hoped it wasn’t out of place to enquire a little.

“Is that your mom?”

Akane paused halfway through placing her tray of snacks on the table, confused for a moment. Turning to look and now understanding, Akane smiled at the young girl.

“Mhm, yes. I... well, I’m afraid I can’t tell you too much about her,” Akane replied. “I was kind of young when she passed away. So, my memories of her... they’re a bit hazy.”

“More remembering a feeling of being safe and comforted, I would guess,” Hibari asked as she sat down beside Akane. “A warmth unique to those times?”

Akane looked over at the red haired girl, taking a moment to think the description over. “Yes. That’s a good way to say it. How... oh. Oh, I’m sorry.”

Hibari gave a relaxed shrug. “It’s almost been ten years. I’ve finished grieving.”

Akane gave a weak smile. “Yeah, I’d same I’m in a similar boat. I miss her sometimes, but usually I can just let myself forget.”

Suzume nodded, a bit confused. She had no real frame of reference for all that. Not sure what she
could contribute, she just knew she had to wait to bring up the idea of watching TV now.

* * *

Ranma sat out on the *engawa*, watching the koi pond. One simple leap, and Akane would stop muttering ‘boys’ under her breath whenever the pigtailed lad tried to chat. Though she might try to kill Ranma for the deception. For some reason that *tourou* near the koi pond was looking like a particularly menacing murder weapon.

“Man, Tokyo’s got loads a’ cute girls. It’s like paradise,” Kousaku said as he slumped against a pillar not far from Ranma.

Ranma tried not to glare at him. “Yeah... ya ce-I heard ya certainly liked, uh, my ...sister.”

Kousaku gave Ranma a guilty shrug. “What can I say? She’s really cute. I know she’s your little sister though, so I’d never dare ask her out or anything without running it past you. I’m not a jerk.”

Ranma couldn’t help laughing at the promise. “Don’t worry, I trust her to never do anythin’ I wouldn’t approve of.”

“Sounds like she’s a good sister. I swear, Nabiki and Akane here have a cold war going on,” Kousaku replied, glancing back into the house. “I don’t understand sibling dynamics myself though, if I’m being honest.”

* * *

“Is that a diamond whetstone?” Tsugumi asked, taking in the Tendo kitchen as she and Kasumi got to work on dinner.

“Yes, it’s a little pricey, but I think it’s worth it,” Kasumi replied as she gave a final examination to the eel she was about to slice.

“I’ve wanted one, but every time I get a decent knife sharpener it goes missing.”

“Why would they go-oh my.”

“Mhm, after being used on those sorts of knives, I definitely don’t want them back in my kitchen. It’s just one of life’s little inconveniences, but it does mean I have to stick to cheaper knives and whetstones for the kitchen.”

Kasumi looked down at the partially prepared eel before her. Suddenly meat wasn’t feeling all that appetising...

Watching it all, Tsubame let out a sigh as she sat at the table. Was the boring domesticity of Tsugumi’s conversation really that much better than whatever perversions Hibari and Ranma would get up to? Either option was feeling pretty terrible.

“You look bored. Keep that up and my big sis will put you to work,” Nabiki said flatly. “C’mon, let’s go have a little chat upstairs.”

Tsubame looked over at the other brunette, her cold eyes and sharp haircut giving a rather unfriendly impression. Still, it wasn’t good to judge a book by it’s cover, and... well, she dealt with yakuza thugs all the time. A fellow high schooler wasn’t going to intimidate her.

“Sure, sounds good,” Tsubame said, as she tried to muster a confident smile.
Following the other girl up the stairs and into a room that felt as cold as its owner’s stare made Tsubame shiver. As she took a seat on what seemed a surprisingly expensive office chair, she looked around for any casual signs of her host being a normal girl. The bookshelf was filled with business magazines and some university level business textbooks. Possibly a ledger or two... was that binder labelled ‘Blackmail Information III’?

“So... Tsubame, are you much involved in the family business?”

“No. I’ve got no interest in any of that stuff.”

Nabiki smiled with a shark-like joy. “Good to hear. Now then, there were one or two little things I’d like to ask you.”

*M * *

“For some reason these cookies are really nice,” Hibari said, growing slightly distracted from her conversation with Akane about recent movies they’d seen.

“Well, Kasumi’s a great cook... I wish I was half as good, but there’s a lot of lost time I have to make up for,” Akane replied. It was a bit embarrassing how her youthful tomboyishness had left her so lacking in feminine skills.

For Hibari though, the impression was rather different. Memories of her later grade school years, pester her eldest sister constantly to get lessons on cooking, sewing, and so on. The feeling that she wasn’t ready unless she was at least twice as good as Tsubame (who, in hindsight, had proven a fortuitously low bar to compare herself against). And so... Hibari found herself wondering if Akane’s own ‘lost time’ was from a similar cause.

“I’m sure you’ll work it out soon enough,” Hibari said, wondering how she could subtly probe.

*M * *

“Are you trying to flirt with Akane?” Kousaku asked, as he noticed Ranma’s eyes drift over to the youngest Tendo once again. “Every time you go over to grab food you’re trying to be chatty... plus you’re complimenting her outfit and stuff.”

“What? No! No...” Ranma protested, relaxing in the yard once again. “I’m... I’m just tryin’ ta be friendly.”

“Sure,” Kousaku replied, munching on some renkon chips. “I heard you. ‘I like your hair bow’. ‘Those are cute socks’. That’s either bad flirting or... something a gay guy’d say.”

Ranma choked and coughed on a gyoza, surprised at the direction things had taken. Regaining breath, the black haired boy took a moment to figure out an excuse. After all, it wasn’t the sort of thing one confessed to when trying to make a good first impression... probably?

“She’s just friends with Hibari, my fiancée, and when I-er, Ran... so I was tryin’ ta be nice without bein’ flirty. I ain’t gay. I don’t even know what somebody’d find appealin’ about a guy,” Ranma protested. Only to start blushing at thoughts of Ryoga’s buff build. And Shampoo’s cursed form. And the dashing smile of... Ukyo?

As Ranma grappled with that last bit, Kousaku grew a bit uncomfortable. He might not be a master manipulator on the level of Nabiki, but he knew people enough to know that Ranma was lying...
badly. With a slightly inflated sense of his looks, Kousaku worried about what he’d do if Ranma began to flirt with him.

And then Kousaku began to wonder about Ranma flirting with him. Only to grow more confused at why his imagination was assuming both Saotome would use identical techniques.

“I wonder if Suzune found anything good on tv.” Ranma announced, leaping to a standing position and heading off to the family room. The handsome lad knew things had gone a bit sideways, and hoped to apply a social version of the ‘Saotome Secret Technique’ (patent pending).

* * *

“Hic-and I still have no idea where Saotome-kun found that blender, but man! The... the look on those farmers’ faces... I’ll never forget it,” Soun declared as he wrapped up a tale of his training days.

Maybe he was rather drunk for 4pm, but Ibari was serving some excellent saké (and a few other spirits). Plus, he’d hoped the drinking had helped with his nerves, and that was certainly proving true. Genma and Ibari had both decided to try to match him, and now all three men were deeply inebriated.

“Pfft, you two were real characters,” Ibari replied, laughing merrily. “The next time we meet up I should invite Akashi-kun over. He’s always better at telling the stories from our days as the Typhoon Brothers than I am... Taiga-kun’s an even better storyteller, but he moved away years ago... no idea where he is these days.”

* * *

Hibari followed Akane down the hallway, curious about the *Shonen Knife* cassette Akane was insisting Hibari needed to hear. The pair made way as a frazzled looking Tsubame emerged from Nabiki’s room.

“You okay sis?” Hibari asked.

“I need a drink,” Tsubame muttered as she brushed past them towards the stairs.

Akane and Hibari gave on another a quick glance, before peaking into Nabiki’s room. The girl with the sharp pageboy hairstyle was calmly leafing through a binder, smiling to herself. Hibari swore the binder was labelled ‘Graduation Plan B: Extreme Path’. Raising an eyebrow, the redhead decided to head after Akane, deciding she’d bring Sabu along to interview Nabiki in future.

Slipping into Akane’s room, Hibari was comforted to see it was much closer to her own decorating preferences than Nabiki’s had appeared. The only real difference was that Akane had chosen to stick almost solely to cassettes, and... well, she had rather different taste in music. Seeing music by *The Stalin* sitting beside a cutey pink stuffed pig was a little jarring. Hibari was glad that the cassette Akane did put on (*Pretty Little Baka Guy*) was rather less hardcore than some of the youngest Tendo’s other choices.

Enjoying the pop-ish music, Hibari’s eyes wandered around the room to land on a framed picture at Akane’s bedside. It showed three younger children, two of them being obviously Kasumi and Nabiki. The third though... well, the hair colour was right, but it was so short and the clothing so boyishly the opposite of Akane’s current love for skirts or dresses that Hibari almost assumed it was a cousin.

“Oh, oops. I forgot I left that picture out,” Akane said as she picked the photo up to look at it. “Those
clothes. And my hair was so short as a kid... sometimes I’d like to cut it again, long hair is so much more of a hassle. Have to keep it long though. I want to be a picture of femininity like my big sister... Kasumi, of course.”

“Definitely an understandable sentiment,” Hibari replied. “I bet you could rock short hair though.”

Akane turned and gave her a smile. “Thank you for your confidence. I’m not certain, but... if I ever wanted to dye it like you I’d definitely save money if it were shorter. I’ll bet Ranma feels a bit odd about your new hair colour though.”

“My... oh. Well, maybe. It’s a very different shade though,” Hibari offered, as she took a glance at her currently orange-y red hair.

“True. It looks much more natural... not to be saying anything bad about Ran’s hair though. It suits her,” Akane replied, quickly adding a cover. She was telling the truth however, she did think the bright red was perfect for Ran’s larger than life personality.

“Oh, Ran’s hair isn’t dyed. Trust me,” Hibari said, giving a smirk and eyebrow wiggle that was answered only by a look of confusion on Akane’s face. Hibari made a mental note that the girl was either hopelessly straight, hopelessly oblivious, or both.

* * *

With their rather delicious and large dinner finished, the teens split off into groups once more, though things were a bit shifted. Akane had insisted on helping with the dishes. Tsubame was sitting with Suzume, quietly watching whatever cartoons the youngest Oozora put on. Ranma, somewhat surprisingly, was attempting some more masculine socialising/sparring in the dojo (Kousaku wasn’t sure how he felt about this, but decided to play it casual). This left Hibari with Nabiki at the kitchen table.

The cold brunette spent a moment quietly taking in Hibari’s casual demeanor. The way she was mostly watching TV, barely paying attention to Nabiki. It almost seemed too easy to try and pry a bit more information from her next target.

“So, Hibari, I have to admit that I’m a bit curious about your family business. There’s so many myths and TV nonsense around the world of Yakuza, I can’t help but wonder about the the reality of it.”

Hibari continued to stare off in the direction of the tv, her demeanor not shifting in the slightest as she replied. “All questions about the family business come with a 5 000 yen asking fee.”

Nabiki’s eye twitched slightly.

“5 000... that’s a bit steep,” she replied, hoping to at least haggle things down. Hibari apparently knew some valuable information from Tsubame’s explanations and Nabiki wanted access.

“That’s the asking fee. Actual answers will have their own fees, when warranted,” Hibari explained casually.

This time Nabiki’s eye twitch was noticeable, and accompanied by her jaw dropping slightly.

To make things worse, Hibari turned to her and gave the most self assured and faux innocent smile Nabiki had ever seen.

* * *
Kousaku was panting furiously as he lay exhausted on the dojo floor. Ranma was sitting not far away.

“For such a beginner, ya ain’t half bad,” Ranma told him, nodding while thinking a few things over. “Akane’s been doin’ most a yer actual teachin’, right?”

“Yeah... old guy tends to just beat me up for an hour or so and then run off,” Kousaku groaned as he forced himself to sit up. Ranma’s idea of training was pretty exhausting too, but less aggressive at least.

“I think I’ll swing around a bit more ta give ya some training from the Saotome school,” Ranma said, an almost unfamiliar feeling welling up. Having Akane to be friends with in girl mode that didn’t know about the curse was a nice thought for wanting to explore that blossoming sense of femininity Ranma was exploring. But Kousaku as a friend for guy mode who didn’t know about the curse and treated Ranma as just one of the guys...

“That would be cool. We could also just kind of hang out some time. I bet you’d get along well with some of the friend’s I’ve made here... and man have I learned that you can kind of drown in estrogen with the Tendo sisters. Adding two extra girls to that... gotta be crazy.”

“Yeah, that sounds like fun,” Ranma replied as he hopped to his feet. “C’mon though, I’ll run ya through two more katas before we call it quits.”
Mountains are Summer

Hibari stopped her studying as she heard the sounds of someone in Ranma’s bedroom. Either someone was snooping around or Ranma was back. Hopping to her feet she slipped over and slid the dividing door open a crack, get the pleasant view of a male Ranma shirtless and in the middle of undressing.

“So, were you hanging out with Kousaku again today?” Hibari asked.

The pigtailed boy looked a bit nervous. “I, yeah... felt like doin’ guy stuff today.”

Hibari walked over and sat herself down on Ranma’s bed. “You’ve had quite a few of those days, this past week or so.”

Ranma sat down on the bed not far from Hibari, feet lifted off the ground as the boy seemed to shrink a bit. “I know... it’s like, he’s normal. I’ve never really seen normal fer guys before. Closest I had was middle school, but I ended up hangin’ out with Ryoga instead. And maybe gettin’ too close ta him, so I ended up an outsider ta the others anyway.”

Hibari leaned up against Ranma and looked up into those charming grey-blue eyes as they stared off into middle space. “So, are you changing your mind about being a girl then?”

Ranma blushed a bit, before turning the meet Hibari’s gaze. “I... well, remember when we were talkin’ with Shampoo about bein’ ‘girls who like both’ an’ all that?”

“Mhm?”

“It got me thinkin’. Maybe I don’t just like both, but am both too? I dunno why, but sometimes I want nothin’ more than ta be cute in a dress and have ya doin’ my hair. Then other days, I’m doin’ guy things all day and likin’ it. I... so I’d like ta try at bein’ both, maybe? If that’s an option you’re allowed,” Ranma explained, turning once more to the empty room.

Hibari smiled, and leaned up towards Ranma’s face, getting close enough he could feel her breath on his cheek. “None of this is ‘allowed’ Ranma. You know how my dad acts about me being a girl. But that isn’t what matters. What matters is what you want.”

Ranma turned, wanting to add something. Only to accidentally brush his lips against hers. Hibari was quick to take that as an invitation, and Ranma soon found himself splayed against his mattress under the forward and adventurous girl as they kissed. As Hibari broke for air, she looked down at him from her position on her knees and elbows she smiled and blew a bit of her red hair out of her face.

“It’s an interesting choice you’ve made, but I’m certainly happy I get to have both your forms around,” she told him, her seductive tone being almost too much for Ranma.

“Ya know, I’d kinda like ta try that again, but in girl mode,” the pigtailed boy said, feeling a bit guilty, but realising he was growing to like Hibari’s physical affection more and more.

“What happened to this being a ‘guy day’?” Hibari asked with a quick wink.

Ranma stuck his tongue out mischievously. “Maybe it ain’t always gonna be so cut and dry. ‘Specially considerin’ how the curse works.”

* * *
The awful smashing sound as a boulder slammed into a tree made Mousse wince. After all, there was a human sandwiched between them. As the boulder fell away, Ryoga was left looking more than a little ragged.

“Are you sure this is how I’m supposed to learn the technique!?” the fanged boy bellowed.

“It’s a classic Nujiuzu training method,” Mousse shouted back. “I know what I’m doing.”

Ryoga snarled and braced himself for another impact as best he could while tied up like he was.

Mousse felt a little guilty. It was true that this method could teach someone the breaking point technique, but only if they had rather ridiculous chi potential to start with. The real purpose of it was conditioning. Still, he figured that Ryoga wouldn’t be fond of continuing if he found out.

* * *

Hibari gave a quick double check to her backpack. Everything necessary was present. A cute jacket for the mountain air. An emergency nyannichuan packet, just in case. A water canteen. All that sort of stuff.

“It’s not fair,” Suzume pouted as she watched Hibari finish packing and occasionally glared at her father. “Hibari’s going to the mountains. Tsubame went off to the beach with her friends. Tsugumi is in Guam! Guam! You’d better have something planned for me! My marks were good, and you said I’d get to have a fun trip if I managed A’s!”

“I... let’s discuss this after your brother leaves with his, er... with Ranma,” Ibari replied nervously, still unsure if he considered Ranma as Hibari’s manliness tutor or felt it would be easier to mentally label the pigtailed teen as Hibari’s future bride. (The latter was easier, but would require accepting the idea of letting Hibari have a husband at least part time.)

Hibari glared silently at her father. Sure, the cold showers to maintain the Jusenkyo magic were mostly for her own benefit, but she’d still hoped the truth would finally break through that thick skull of his sooner or later.

“Alright, let’s get goin’,” Ranma announced as he appeared in the hallway. His hefty pack looked like it would topple the average teen if they tried to carry it.

“Coming!” Hibari chimed as she hopped to her feet and hoisted her much smaller rucksack. As the pair headed towards the front door Ranma couldn’t help eyeing how small Hibari’s pack was. She had to be missing things. He was just about to say something when the front door slid open to reveal a smiling Ukyo standing there with a backpack of her own.

“Hey there Ran-chan. Heard there’s going to be a nice little trip to some secluded mountains. I figured that, as your fiancée, I should be heading along to keep you company.”

Ranma and Hibari were left silent for a moment as they tried to work out how Ukyo had gotten wind of their training trip with a smugly smiling Ukyo appearing.

“Ah, Kuonji! It’s good to see you. I do hope you’ll use this trip as an opportunity to get some quality time in with my son,” the mustachioed Yakuza boss stated, glaring at the chef towards the end to underline his reasoning for keeping her informed. He still hadn’t totally given up on getting Hibari a ‘proper’ bride afterall. (Or at least as proper as Ukyo counted as.)

“Y-yeah! Of course, boss,” Ukyo replied with a casual salute and a slight grimace.
The trio had managed to walk in awkward silence for a few minutes before Ukyo couldn’t take it any longer.

“Listen, I’m Ran-chan’s fiancée too, and I’m not about to just roll over and let you declare victory, Hibari,” she declared.

“I’m not bothered,” Hibari snapped defensively. “I know I’ve already won. This will just mean Ranma and I get to show off our love. Right dear?”

“It’s a training trip. Ucchan, if you’re comin’ along then you’re trainin’ too, got that?” Ranma said, sliding between the two glaring girls.

“I’m a martial artist too. I’m happy to train,” Ukyo replied curtly, turning with a huff to stare ahead.

Ranma let out a defeated sigh... this was just going as poorly as possible, wasn’t it?

“Nihao!” Shampoo called out. She’d been waiting for them at the bus station, her pack all prepared.

Ranma’s eye twitched. “Sh-Shampoo. What a surprise... who told you about this trip?”

Shampoo looked back and forth from Hibari to Ukyo with genuine confusion. “Hibari said you and her would be gone from today to Monday, to let me know you and her be out of town for a bit. Then spatula-boy says she is going to mountains with tongzhi... maybe gloating? That makes me think should come along too. Join the fun.”

“Would you stop calling me spatula-boy!?” Ukyo shouted.

“You’d prefer spatula-girl? That would lead to many questions at school you know,” Shampoo replied casually.

“I. Have. A. Name,” the chef seethed.

“Mhm. Spatula-Boy,” Hibari said.

Ukyo took a deep breath and tried to swallow her anger. “Nope. Nope. I’m going on this trip. I will have a good time, and Ran-chan will be happy to have me around, and you and China girl can go canoodle in the woods for all I care.”

“Let’s just get on the bus,” Ranma sighed.

The cool mountain air was a welcome reprieve too all. Especially Shampoo, who was simply not used to Tokyo summers (even if she was now freed of the Cat’s Tongue). Following the others up the mountainside, Shampoo was certain that she’d look into buying a cabin up in the mountains after she was married. Tokyo was fun, but she wasn’t sure how many summers she could handle there. The Oozoras could certainly afford to buy a cabin, she’d just need to accept it might get decked out as something of a safe house.

The Chinese girl then realised she’d fallen a bit behind while lost in thought, and hurried forward to catch up to the others.

Ranma felt a pang of satisfaction as the four of them rounded the bend. There ahead of them was one of his favourite camping spots. It was just high enough to stay cool all summer, and the view off to
the east, where you could watch the sun rise, had always struck him as magnificent.

The trip might not being going to plan, but some things were still working out.

"Alright, time to set up camp," Ranma announced.

There were mumbles of agreement as the three girls began digging through their rucksacks. Ranma was sliding poles in place on his own tent when Ukyo let out a dramatic sigh.

"Oh no. I managed to forget my tent," the chef announced dramatically. "I can only hope some gentleman will let me share his."

Before Ranma could complain Shampoo released a similarly over the top gasp. "I forgot tent too. Hopefully tongzhi share tent? Honourable option."

"Really, you two? You 'forgot' your tents?" Hibari said, chiding them both. "Very smooth."

Ranma was about to thank Hibari for showing common sense when he realised that she'd done no unpacking whatsoever. Did all three of them really decide on what had to be the lamest excuse Ranma had ever heard? "It looks like you forgot your tent too..."

"Forgot? I figured the plan for this trip from the start was to share," Hibari replied casually. "This being a romantic getaway and all."

Ranma let out an exasperated sigh. "It's going to be crowded, guys... My tent's only big enough for me and pops."

"The ol’ Panda’s easily the size of the three of us combined," Hibari replied. Shampoo and Ukyo both nodded. Disparaging remarks about Ranma’s father was something all three of them could support.

"Well, at least we shouldn’t be cold tonight," Ranma grumbled. "I’m puttin’ you three in charge of gatherin’ firewood while I continue settin’ up."

* * *

A brief rain shower had resulted in two Jusenkyo curses activating. Otherwise things had gone well enough. Ranma had put the others tree leaping practice for a few hours, slowly adding more rocks to their backpacks as the day went on to make things more challenging. In the end, Shui was proud to be carrying by far the largest pile of rocks. A fact that made Ukyo surprisingly annoyed. They were also exhausted, as Ranma had decided to try to push the three to be too tired to argue.

Now though, came the challenging part. Satiated on a mixture of Qinghai cuisine and okonomiyaki, the four were now trying to work out sleeping arrangements.

“I call beside Ranma,” Hibari announced, finding a second wind with which to prepare to argue.

“What? Nu-uh. I’m going beside Ranma. You hog him...her...um, Ranma enough as is,” Ukyo declared.

“I’ve got two sides ya know. If it’ll really ensure peace, I’ll sleep between ya both,” the short redhead replied.

Hibari and Ukyo glared at one another briefly before acquiescing to the plan.

“I call other side of tongzhi Hibari,” Shui added.
“Are you going to get changed before night?” Ukyo asked the cursed girl, sound almost a little accusative.

Shui paused a moment to weigh the options. “Nah, am warmer in guy form. It gets cold in mountains at night, no?”

“A bit nippy, yeah,” Ranma replied. “I guess you can try birth form tomorrow night?”

“Ooh, maybe.”

As Ranma and Shui pulled off some of their clothing to reveal that both were wearing a sports bra and boxers, Hibari noticed Ukyo glaring at Shui. The taller redhead of the quartet raised an eyebrow. Was Ukyo considering Shampoo the greater threat... or was that envy in those greenish eyes?

* * *

Hibari felt warm with strong arms wrapped around her. Snuggling in, she wondered absently what Ranma had been doing to add that bulk. She could stay like this all day...

“You two awake yet?” Ranma’s female voice called out from behind her somewhere.

“Tongzhi is still sleeping,” Shui’s voice replied, Hibari feeling the vibration of the cursed girl’s chest as she spoke.

Hibari shoved off Shui and rolled away, feigning being asleep still. She did her best to maintain that until she felt Ranma reach over and nudge her. Stretching and blinking a few times, she turned to the cute little redhead.

“Morning sweety,” Hibari said, before leaning in to kiss Ranma on the cheek.

“Woah, hey... with Ucchan around, maybe we shouldn’t be quite so forward with things, in case she sees,” Ranma protested weakly.

“I saw,” Ukyo commented dryly from somewhere outside.

“Gah!” Ranma winced, scrambling out from the tent to try and placate the chef in question. “Listen, Ucchan, let’s try ta focus on trainin’ alright?”

Ukyo smirked, before standing and walking over to her short fiancé(e). Placing a hand on Ranma’s chin, she lifted Ranma’s face towards her. After taking a quick glance over to Hibari and Shui, who were still climbing out of the tent, and giving the pair a smug look, Ukyo leaned in and planted her own lips on Ranma’s. Moving her hand to the small of Ranma’s back, it was quite clear to the others that Ukyo was taking a very masculine approach to this kiss... and Ranma wasn’t resisting in the least.

As the pair broke and Ukyo gave Hibari a confident smile, Ranma reached forward subconsciously in her hope for a bit more of that. Shui meanwhile jumped back a bit as Hibari looked ready to blow.

“I... I’m going for a walk!” Hibari shouted. She had not missed Ranma’s body language.

Turning, she grabbed her pack, pulled out her jacket, grabbed her shoes, and stormed off in her underwear before Ranma had recovered from Ukyo’s kiss.

Shui was left frantically looking between Ranma and Hibari, trying to figure out who it was more important to follow. Locking eyes with Ukyo, who was grinning ear to ear, Shui decided staying to
Ryoga felt himself swaying slightly in the breeze.

Mousse had gone off to find another boulder, Ryoga’s attempts to find the breaking point having finally damaged that one beyond use. The fanged boy wanted to say he was proud of the progress he’d made, but... it had been nearly a week and he’d still not mastered the breaking point. He was due to have his duel with Ranma in two days. And then... even if he somehow won, that was only a small part of his bid to win Hibari’s heart.

Things were looking hopeless when a bit of movement on the edge of his peripherals drew his attention.

Someone was approaching, and it wasn’t Mousse. The jacket was too dark.

It took a moment for the mixture of the rising sun and the girl’s approach, for Ryoga to realise it was Hibari (her hair red, to Ryoga’s joy). For a moment he thought she was wearing one of Ranma’s shirts, but soon realised it was a satin red bomber jacket with white trim. And... no pants. Yhat gave Ryoga a bit of a nosebleed.

“Ryoga?” Hibari asked, peering up into the trees. “Who tied you up like that?”

“I’m training. Mousse tied me up,” Ryoga called back nervously. What was she doing here? And alone? Could... could his dreams have come true, and Hibari had dumped Ranma?

“Huh... never realised Mousse was into that sort of stuff. Kinky,” the girl replied, before sticking her tongue out.

“I... it’s not like that! I swear! I’m not-” Ryoga stuttered on his own defense. Was he really going to try to tell Hibari he wasn’t gay? That wouldn’t go well for his romantic efforts... or would it? He knew Hibari was focused on being feminine.

Ryoga let out a defeated sigh as he realised he had no idea which option was better. He’d just play it safe. “I’m not interested in Mousse like that.”

Hibari giggled a bit, before hopping her way up to a branch near Ryoga. “I’ve told you you’re cute when you’re flustered, right?”

“I... uh,” Ryoga replied as he struggled to keep his mouth shut, taking in Hibari’s slender and shapely legs as she stood on the branch near him. She was just. So. Perfect. “Wuh-what are you doing here? Is Ranma around?”

“I... uh,” Ryoga replied as he struggled to keep his mouth shut, taking in Hibari’s slender and shapely legs as she stood on the branch near him. She was just. So. Perfect. “Wuh-what are you doing here? Is Ranma around?”

Hibari pouted, shifting to a crouch as she stared back to where she’d come from. “One kiss and she turns into butter... turns out it doesn’t matter who the kiss comes from. I don’t know, maybe I shouldn’t be too surprised. No way he got much love from that dumb panda of a father... but is someone who doesn’t fall in love with a new person every three days too much for me to want?”

Ryoga found himself unable to meet Hibari’s eyes as he thought of that infatuation with another redhead. Guilt also welled in him at the feeling of temptation to try kissing Ranma for himself, to see how that went.

But no. He was certain that if he won Hibari over he’d be loyal. It was just his doubts about being able to win her heart that was leading him astray. It had to be.
Filled with determination, Ryoga turned to her and met those bright blue eyes with his gaze. “H-he doesn’t deserve you! I’ll... I’ll beat him tomorrow, to get back at his hurting you.”

Hibari smiled. “You do certainly know how to make a girl feel important, fighting over me like that.”

“Heh, well, uh,” Ryoga began, growing more flustered as Hibari stood and stretched, revealing that she was indeed not wearing anything beyond shoes, underwear, and jacket. The sight of that lacy pink tie up thong caused Ryoga to nearly lose consciousness for a moment.

Hibari was wondering just what else she could do to tease Ryoga when a voice cut across the forest towards her.

“You! Come to spy on us, have you!?” Mousse shouted, angrily dropping the rope he’d been using the drag the boulder behind him as he hopped up into the trees not far from the other two. “If you’ve come for a fight, I’ll gladly give you one, Saotome!”

The last comment was shouted directly at the trunk of the tree Mousse was standing on. Hibari and Ryoga both had to wonder how Mousse found was able to land on something as thin as a branch, yet had vision bad enough to mistake a trunk for a person.

“Does he echolocate, maybe?” Hibari whispered to Ryoga.

“No idea.”

Mousse spun around, having heard their voices, and decided to put his glasses on. “Oh. It’s the other one. You both wear red too much... it’s confusing... Anyway! I’m not going to let you spy on us either.”

“I’m not here to spy,” Hibari countered, placing her hands on her hips and leaning towards Mousse. “I didn’t even know you guys were out here. I was just going for a walk.”

Mousse’s face scrunched up in annoyance. “Well, fine. Keep walking then.”

“Whatever,” Hibari replied, waving Mousse off before turning to Ryoga and giving him a wink. “I’ll see you later, handsome.”

Ryoga was a blushing mess as Hibari hopped down from the tree and kept walking. Mousse glared at him for a moment, before silently admitting that it it was essential to his plans that Ryoga was interested in Hibari (as much as he was certain a household without a ‘real’ woman to take control was doomed). Hopping down and heading back to drag the boulder into the tree, Mousse wondered if Hibari or Saotome could manage to take control or a relationship. They were both remarkably feminine... and then there was Shampoo, debasing herself for foreign males with her curse. Could he still love a woman who was willing to let a man be the head of a household as Shampoo seemed prepared to do?

It left the bespectacled boy more than a little confused as he brought the boulder into place.

“Prepare yourself, Hibiki. I’m going in for another swing.”

Ryoga turned, locking eyes on the boulder. He had hope again, all he had to do was master this technique.

As the boulder swung towards him, it felt as if it were moving in slow motion. Ryoga felt a surge of chi in his body as he studied the boulder. Suddenly he saw it as a spider’s web of tiny cracks. Nearly all were converging to one place.
Letting out a confident cry of fury, Ryoga swing his finger to hit that point.

The cracking noise as the boulder shattered into a hail of pebbles was nearly deafening for Ryoga. Yet he swore that he barely felt the explosion of rock.

Smiling, he turned up at Mousse. “I did it!”

Mousse stared in shock. Ryoga had done it... was this dork really a qi prodigy?

* * *

Not far away, Hibari heard the sound of an explosion, and stopped her rifling through Mousse’s backpack in search of a protein bar (or anything else to fill her currently empty stomach... why had she stormed off without food?).

She didn’t know what caused that sound, but her gut was filled with worry for Ranma (despite her current annoyance with the pigtailed teen). She knew she needed to head back around to investigate, and set the pack down... only to have a chocolate bar fall out.

Sure, it was a Tirol bar, and Hibari wasn’t really a huge fan of nougat, but it was better than nothing. She pocketed the chocolate, and hurried around to take a peek at what Ryoga and Mousse were up to (if Mousse would accuse her of spying, then maybe she should actually spy).

Slinking along, she found Ryoga laughing in a rather unsettling way as he wandered around causing small rocks to explode by... poking them?

Hibari had no idea how that worked, but knew she had to tell Ranma.

* * *

Ranma and Shui were panting as their sparring round wrapped up. Ranma tried to blame Shui’s winning on how distracted she was, watching the treeline to see if Hibari would return. Maybe she should have gone after the taller redhead... but Ranma still felt Hibari had overreacted. It wasn’t like Hibari had been so against the idea of a trio before. What made Ukyo such a bad candidate?

“Tongzhi, if your mind is not in state to fight, maybe I should spar with Kuonji?” Shui asked, glad to see Ranma was worried about Hibari.

Ranma missed that while turning to the shirtless masculine form of Shui. The short redhead briefly wondered why Shampoo was so comfortable being shirtless in cursed mode... wasn’t she supposed to have some feminine modesty?

“Pheh, ya, sure. Ucchan needs ta get some sparrin’ in too,” Ranma replied, waving the chef into the field while wandering over to sit on a nearby rock.

The glare Ukyo gave Shui while walking into the ‘ring’ was nasty. The chef had been feeling extra competitive all weekend. It just wasn’t fair how someone as feminine as Shampoo, who put so little effort into presenting masculine at school that everyone had slotted Shui as gay almost instantly, was still getting to have all the advantages thanks to Jusenkyo. No need to bind. Increased muscle mass. Added height.

“Begin,” Ranma called out casually.

Ukyo charged. Sure, unarmed combat wasn’t the chef’s usual style, but it would probably be satisfying to land a punch to Shui’s unfairly handsome face. Ukyo knew exactly how to play the part
of a boy. She’d studied so well that playing the part of a girl felt alien now… She couldn’t lose on both fronts to Hibari and Shampoo.

Unfortunately for all her rage, Shui dodged or blocked almost all her strikes. The few that got through were little more than glancing blows. A sudden knee to the gut from the cursed girl caught Ukyo off guard.

Stumbling back, Ukyo was now on the receiving end of Shui’s counteroffensive. A flurry of strikes that proved the Nujiezu warrior was at least close to Ranma’s equal, if not there, thanks to pushing herself harder than she had back home. It was harder to feel a push to improve when she was the best youth in the village (sent to spar with adults from age 13), but now, with so many more martial arts to study, Shampoo had doubled down on training.

Shui was about to knock Ukyo down with a leg sweep as Hibari’s voice called out across the clearing. The spar ground to a halt as everyone turned to watch an out of breath Hibari emerge from the trees.

Ranma and Shui rushed over, leaving Ukyo to sigh before hurrying after.

“Is everything okay? What happened? Were you running from something?” Ranma asked, placing a hand on each of Hibari’s arms in an effort to reassure the taller girl.

“Ryoga’s not far away. Mousse was training with him. He... he did something to make rocks explode with his finger,” Hibari replied, between her panting. “I know it sounds crazy. It’s what I saw, though.”

Shui nodded sagely. “Breaking point technique. Mousse probably just wanted to toughen him up, but it seem pig-boy is a fast learner.”

“Breaking point? What does it do?” Ukyo asked.

“What it says. You find weak point. Hit with pressure and a little qi, then boom. Thing explodes.”

The other three paled. Ryoga was bringing something like that to tomorrow’s duel?

“So... if he touches me, I’ll explode?” Ranma asked, her adorable baby face only magnifying the look of fear she had.

“What? No, no. Person is too complicated. And squishy. Could maybe work on fingernails and teeth, if he touch that. Would work on bone, but if bone exposed you already in trouble,” Shui explained.

The others let out a sigh of relief in unison.

“Don’t relax. Training technique makes skin hard as... well, not quite iron, but close. I am not sure if tongzhi Ranma strong enough to hurt pig-boy now,” Shui continued, sounding rather nervous. “With fight only tomorrow... not sure how to get Ranma enough stronger in time.”

Ranma shrugged. “I mean, pops has been havin’ me do more strength trainin’ lately. Tryin’ ta get me ta be ‘less girly’.”

“Still, have felt your punches,” Shui replied. “Not enough for breaking point master.”

“Have you done this training, luv?” Ukyo asked. (Suddenly that sensation of rivalry vanished as the group faced a common threat.)
“Not full training yet,” Shui replied. “Usually wait until an adult. But know what is like to spar with masters who have.”

Ranma nodded, growing deep in thought. What would increase her punching force? ... Well, obviously the quickest improvement would be switching to it being his punching force, but that still might not be enough.

“What about my kicks?” Ranma asked.

“Worth shot. Try kicking trees. If can split grown tree in one kick, then... maybe?”

“Well, time ta get crackin’,” Ranma replied, grinning at her own terrible pun.
The sun was still rising as Ranma and Ryoga stood across for each other, bathing both boys in a warm orange light. The clearing in the woods provided their small gathering of spectators the ability to watch from a safe distance, should Ryoga start making liberal use of the breaking point technique.

“So, you can still meet me to fight like a man then, Ranma?” Ryoga asked, sneering with a confidence he wasn’t used to feeling.

“Oh lay off it, Co-chan. I can beat the snot out of ya as a guy or a girl,” Ranma declared confidently.

Ryoga bared his teeth, before turning towards the treeline where the girls and Mousse were watching. “Hibari! I’m going to win this as the first step to proving I’m worthy of you!”

“Insulting Ranma for his femininity isn’t a way to impress me!” the red haired girl shouted back from the trees.

“I-that’s just trash talk!” Ryoga replied, his blush visible to the audience despite the distance.

“Are we fightin’ or not?” Ranma asked. “If ya want, ya can just surrender now.”

“I’m going to win!” Ryoga shouted, charging Ranma.

The pigtailed boy dodged, but was amazed how much faster Ryoga had gotten. “Huh, so you didn’t just sit there getting hit by a rock all day?”

Ryoga answered with a volley of punches, keeping Ranma on the defensive. As Ranma swirled out of the way, Ryoga extended a finger.

“Taste breaking point!” the fang boy bellowed.

The explosion of soil and rocks pelted both combatants, Ranma managing to dodge most of them while Ryoga, in the centre of the blast, took the brunt of it without flinching.

“Seems I just gotta let ya do that a bunch and you’ll knock yerself out,” Ranma taunted.

“Hah, I didn’t even feel it,” Ryoga declared.

Taking a confident pose to show off his invincibility, Ryoga saw Ranma’s fist flying towards his face. The pigtailed boys strike was too fast for Ryoga to dodge, and it collided with Ryoga’s cheek in a hard thud.

“You’ve been slacking Ranma! Your punches back in middle school were harder than that!” Ryoga taunted, having barely reacted to the blow beyond his head turning a bit with the impact.

Ranma struggled to keep the fear off his face. Shampoo had warned him the technique would toughen Ryoga, but he wasn’t expecting it to be that big an improvement. As Ryoga launched a counter offensive, Ranma silently accepted that kicks were indeed his best hope. Swinging around to dodge, he left Ryoga’s blow overextended, and slammed a foot into Ryoga’s side with all his might.

The fanged boy flew across the open field, and slammed into a stand of trees. As the large trunks collapsed into a heap, Ranma ran over, panting. Ryoga was buried alive. Surely the fight was over?

That was when he heard laughter from within the pile of timber. Followed by crashing sounds as
Ryoga burst forth from the debris pile.

“Is that really your best shot? I don’t even need to worry about blocking!” Ryoga declared, laughing confidently.

Ryoga launched himself forward, a finger extended, and slammed into the earth mere centimetres from where Ranma had been standing. As the hail of pebbles smacked against him, Ryoga growled when he saw how far Ranma had managed to leap.

“Running away are you? Just like always?”

Ranma opened his mouth, instinctively wanting to give a snappy reply, yet had none. Running away to get some time to think had been his plan after the kick failed to do anything appreciable.

Well, one kick had failed.

“Nah, just needed a break from B.O., piggy!” Ranma taunted, filled with confidence and a new plan.

Charging across the field, Ranma decided to see if he could push the speed of his kicks as much as he’d learned to improve his punches. Ryoga found himself receiving a blinding volley of kicks, hitting too fast for him to even think about blocking. The assault had been so fast Ryoga had only become airborne from the force as the last few kicks had collided.

The fanged boy flew in a low arc, before slamming into the ground and digging a trail through the dirt as inertia continued to propel him, despite the resistance from the soil he was ploughing through. He came to a halt not far from a steep drop off of a small creek gulley.

“I’ll admit, I felt that one,” Ryoga said as he climbed back to his feet. He was hurting and worried he might end up losing the fight, when he looked over and saw Ranma panting as the pigtailed boy headed over to continue the fight. “I guess launching a few dozen kicks is a little tiring, isn’t it?”

“Feh, I’ve got plenty of endurance. I survived dating you for a whole year in middle school afterall,” Ranma replied. In retrospect it had taken a lot of endurance on those two or three day walks to help Ryoga find his house or the grocery store or whatever back then.

“I thought you were a virgin!?!” Hibari shouted, before bursting into laughter.

Mousse, Ukyo, Ryoga, and Ranma all stared at Hibari in confusion for a moment as they tried to work out the link. Shampoo, for her part, joined Hibari in laughing immediately.

“Always good to find partner with endurance,” Shampoo said between the giggles.

“I but wh-Oh! No! I didn’t mean that!” Ranma protested, turning beet red.

“Didn’t mean what? I’m confused?” Ryouga asked, while Ukyo joined in on the laughter.

“I didn’t need that mental image!” Mousse blurted.

“Bah, you probably picture it out of focus anyway,” Shampoo replied.

Ranma attempted to further protest his innocence, while teasing erupted from the peanut gallery.

Growing more frustrated at his inability to follow the conversation, Ryoga released a primal roar before throwing himself at Ranma, attempting to tackle the pigtailed boy. Ranma yelped, having been distracted by embarrassment, and stumbled as he lept. Not watching his footing well, Ranma tumbled down onto the edge of the drop off and then slid down the muddy incline towards a small
stream below.

By the time Ranma was done tumbling, it was an angry and damp redhead glaring up from the bottom of the small ravine.

“Heh, looks like we'll find out if your claim you can beat me as a girl is true or not,” Ryoga declared, looking down at his foe.

“Why don't ya come on down and try me? It'll be a nice quick fight.”

“I'd prefer to stay dry myself, thanks,” Ryoga replied.

Grumbling, the short redhead decided to take this as a chance to get a short breather while analysing the easiest way back up. A tree a short distance away looked springy enough.

Ranma leapt over and bounded off the young flexible trunk. Getting a good amount of air, Ranma hoped to use the added benefit of gravity to get a little more force in the next volley of kicks. Ryoga attempted to dodge, but Ranma managed to twist through the air in a down right catlike manner and strike true with the first kick. Ryoga made no effort to count, but suspected at least a few dozen kicks had hit before Ranma made landfall.

Stumbling back, Ryoga had to grimace. “So You can still hit. Wasn't quite as hard as before though. I could probably take another two or three of those easy. How many more do you think you can give?”

Panting, Ranma winced at the news. The short redhead knew one or two more was the limit. Ranma didn't like the idea of gambling that much. Curse Ryoga’s thick skin. Blows just bounced off.

Blows. That wasn't the only option in a martial artist's playbook, as recent sparring with Akane had reminded Ranma so well.

Smiling, the redhead beckoned Ryoga with one hand. Unsure of Ranma's intentions, Ryoga hoped it was just the pigtailed girl’s idea to accept the loss more quickly, and decided he could help with that.

Ryoga was more annoyed than anything as Ranma dodged. He then felt Ranma’s hand on his shoulder. Followed by the small girl’s mass swinging around his torso. And then strong thighs pressing against his arm and neck.

It took Ryoga a moment to realise he was locked in a flying sankaku jime choke hold. Ranma using a grappling technique was so unusual he’d left himself wide open to it. Still, Ryoga was the better grappler of the two, so there was no need to worry. It wouldn’t be hard for him to wiggle out from between her legs.

Wait. Her legs.

Suddenly Ryoga began to to blush at the thought of where he was, and therefore what was just in front of his face. Suddenly, he felt light headed a bit faster than he thought the chokehold should have meant.

“Woah!” Ranma yelped as Ryoga tumbled over. Realising the fanged boy was out cold already, Ranma was a bit surprised. “Huh, I guess I was squeezing harder than I thought?”

“No! No, no, no!” Mousse protested as he ran over and tried to shake Ryoga awake. “Come on! You can’t lose! How are you supposed to break up Saotome and Oozora if you lose?”
“Mousse,” Shampoo said coldly as she walked over. “What did I tell you about trying to intervene in Airen’s relationship!!?”

“I-I wasn’t intervening! I was just supporting a fellow martial artist on his path to self betterment!” Mousse insisted, scrambling over to kowtow at the base of a tree that he’d clearly mistaken for Shampoo.

“Mousse, you idiot,” Shampoo hissed under her breath.

Ranma, feeling a bit tired still, struggled to her feet. Only to be tackled from three sides by Hibari, Shampoo, and Ukyo, who all wrapped her in a congratulatory hug. Ranma was already feeling a bit overwhelmed by the attention when she received a kiss of each cheek, one from Hibari and the second from Ukyo. (Shampoo abstained from kissing to maintain plausible deniability on her ‘forget the engagement’ act.)

As Ukyo and Hibari glared at each other from either side of Ranma, the short redhead was busy blushing furiously while her pigtail stood on end.

“A guy could get used to this kind of attention... or a girl. A girl could get used to it too,” Ranma muttered absently.

Hibari and Ukyo’s glares shifted target to her face.

“I’m not playing to share,” Ukyo protested.

“I can be more than enough for you all on my own,” Hibari countered, moving in so that Ranma could feel the taller redhead’s breath.

A stroke from Hibari’s hand down her pigtail cause Ranma to shiver, and then Hibari’s softly kissing her lower neck proved too much, turning Ranma fully to jelly.

A flustered Ukyo struggled with the sensuality of it all. “W-well, come on. Let’s get back to camp. I’ll cook you up a lunch worthy of a winner, Ranchan.”

Ranma could only smile dumbly. The warm feeling of being surrounded by love was addicting, even if she could sense the tension between Hibari and Ukyo, but had no idea how to fix it.

* * *

Ryoga awoke to the sound of annoyed cat meows. Sitting up in the grassy field, it took him a moment to spot the black kitten tied to one of the nearby trees.

“Heh, I guess you got in trouble with Shampoo, eh?” Ryoga asked as he walked over to Mousse.

The cat of a boy glared angrily in Ryoga’s general direction.

“Hey, it was your idea... and I-I guess maybe I’m still not over Ranma? Or not over Ranma’s girl side at least,” Ryoga explained as he untied the other boy. “Man, Shampoo is good with knots, I might just have to cut these.”

* * *

Ukyo groaned as something poked her side. When the poking repeated, she begrudgingly opened her eyes. There was a dark shape over her in the tent, and it took a moment for her to realise it was Ranma. The other figure gave her a silent shush, and then a head gesture to the outside. Ukyo
nodded tentatively, and followed silently as Ranma slipped out.

If Ukyo had been a bit more lucid, her heart would have been thumping in anticipation. Instead it was more confusion and worry about tripping or making any noise.

Only once they were firmly out of hearing range did Ranma stop and turned to Ukyo.

“You said you weren’t ‘playin’ to share’ today, and I just gotta ask: why not?”

Ukyo blinked in confusion. “I, well, it’s just not how it’s done? Love’s an all or nothing game.”

“But why’s it gotta be?” Ranma asked as he nervously rubbed the back of his neck. “I’ve been thinkin’, ever since Shampoo was sayin’ she liked the idea of sharin’ and... I don’t get why people dont?”

“Is it so bad to want all of someone’s heart, Ranchan?”

“I dunno Ucchan, but I do know that how much I care about ya doesn’t seem ta decrease how much I care about Hibari. It makes bein’ around more than one person make so much more sense. Wait, d’ya... d’ya think that means I can’t love somebody with all my heart? That’s there’s still extra space left?”

Ukyo watched Ranma’s face turn pained by the fear that was bubbling in his chest. Seeing him looking so hurt, Ukyo had to look away, staring up at the endless sea of stars above them. It was a humbling reminder of how small they were in this vast universe, and, if the universe was so big, maybe there was room to try something new.

“I don’t know, Ranchan. But, if you really think love can work with more than two people, I’ll at least try. You have to get Hibari to agree though, and not to see me as playing second fiddle. If I share, it’s as an equal... and I still can’t promise that’s something I can do.”

Ranma smiled that adorable and innocent smile he did sometimes (and she did quite often). “Thanks Ucchan. I’ll try talkin’ ta her, see how it goes.”

* * *

Ranma, now back in Tokyo, was starting to fall asleep as she stared at her newest opponent. This one was more insidious than any she’d faced before, wearing her down relentlessly.

“I told you to pace your summer break homework better,” Hibari said from somewhere behind her.

“Hey! I finished like two thi—” Ranma began protesting as she swivelled her chair around. What she saw surprised her. “Y—you’re blonde again.”

“Yeah... tomorrow’s the first day of a new semester. Kaori might try something, and I don’t want to have to worry about a wig while she’s plotting her pointless pranks. And I wouldn’t put it past dad to be extra annoying for the first day of school too,” Hibari replied casually as she walked over and sat down on Ranma’s bed. “You could go as a redhead tomorrow though. Do your ‘girl mode’ debut.”

“I...er, well... I do feel a little less fidgety in girl mode,” Ranma said, half to herself. “But, I’d feel awkward tryin’ ta ask the girls ta let me in the changeroom though. An’ if I was girl for everythin’ else... then the guys’d harass me like crazy if I changed with them. I ain’t scared a’ that, but it sounds annoyin’, y’know?”

“I suppose that’s fair. Too bad though, I was hoping to do your makeup again.”
Ranma blushed and began to twiddle her thumbs while glancing nervously towards Hibari. “Well, today’s its own day. And I could use a break from homework.”

Hibari smiled and leaned forward to softly tap Ranma on the nose with her index finger. “Homework first. The makeover is your reward. I will, however, be happy to provide some very hands on tutoring.”

“Th-that sounds nice too,” Ranma replied, turning even redder. Serious relationship discussions could wait a little longer.

* * *

The first day of the semester was generally a casual affair. Handing in homework from the break. A good quarter of the students begging for extensions, with a wide range of excuses. Teachers discussing the rubrics for the semester ahead. Kaori attempting to socially assassinate Hibari and having it blow up in her face (the idea to wear stilettos to out seductress the blonde had led to her nearly twisting her ankle). The usual.

Oh, and Shiina had tried to challenge Ranma to another fight. It... well, it hadn’t gone well for the lanky boxer, though Ranma had to respect that he’d obviously been training hard over the summer. (But had focused far too much on dodging, in Ranma’s opinion.)

Now the classes were done, and Ranma was hoping to escape from school for the day. He’d never understand people who hung around for hours in their clubs. There was so much more to do off school grounds.

Ukyo was similarly hoping to leave, although the chef’s logic was focused more on profit margins for the restaurant than an innate disdain for school.

Shui and Hibari were in no hurry however, sharing the gossip they’d heard from other students. Between the bits Hibari got from the girls and what Shui got from the boys, they were trying to figure out if two students who talked about a summer romance were actually talking about one another or not.

“Hibari!” a girl called out, not far down the hallway. “The volleyball team is having tryouts! Let’s get going!”

“Volleyball team? Ya want ta join a team?” Ranma asked.

“Nah,” Hibari replied dismissively. “It’s just that the captain, Ootori Jun, is really handsome. All the girls love to watch her, so the volleyball team practices are usually closed. Otherwise they can barely hear each other over the audience.”

Ukyo shook her head. “I’ll never understand why so many girls are so fond of the ‘handsome girl’ category.”

“If you don’t want to come along, you don’t have to,” Hibari replied, sticking her tongue out while she was already jogging off towards the other girls.

“Yeah, I’m good,” Ukyo shrugged. There were many better things to do with her time. “I guess it’ll be just you and me then, eh Ranma?... Ranma?”

* * *

“Jun-sama! I love you!”
“Sempai! You’re amazing!”

The cheers of the girls spectating nearly drowned out the sound of the practice itself. Well, almost... Captain Ootori’s shouts at the tryout candidates were quite loud. Watching from the second level walkway above the gym, Ranma, Hibari, Rie, and Shampoo were enjoying the view themselves. (How Shampoo had managed to find a kettle, get changed, do her hair and makeup, and still arrive at the gym only a few moments after them, Ranma and Hibari couldn’t begin to speculate.)

“Y’know, I always did think girls with short hair looked good,” the black haired Ranma commented absently.

Suddenly the crowd of girls around went quiet as they noticed the intruder in their midst (Rie herself blushed, having not registered the form Ranma had taken). Feeling nervous about being the only boy in the crowd, and worrying about the daggers the girls were staring, Ranma produced a water bottle and dumped it over her head to take female form.

A ripple of whispers spread at that, followed by the girls around nodding and going back to shouting their love of captain Ootori.

“That was odd,” Ranma half whispered to Hibari and Shampoo.

“This whole event is odd. I knew that Wakaba had reputation for having some lesbians, but this... this almost all the girls in school?” Shampoo replied.

“Those two things are related. You see, girls having a crush on someone like Ootori-sempai is considered perfectly heterosexual,” the blonde explained.

Shampoo and Ranma stared at her, utterly confused.

“Ootori’s butch enough that it’s seen as girls being interested in boys, but still shy and young, so they’re afraid of actual boys and cling to masculine girls instead,” Hibari continued. “Ranma, having been in male form earlier, threatened that appearance by showing that a guy could like Ootori.”

“This ‘girls really want boy, but scared’ idea... it is male logic, isn’t it?” Shampoo asked.

“Yeah, basically,” Hibari replied.

“This is why you not let men run things. End up with nonsense like thinking blatant lesbianism really about them.”

Rie blushed, wanting to protest. She was pretty sure she did just think Ootori was handsome...

Ranma, for her part, was wondering if that meant she had just gained at least honorary ‘girl’ status, going by the whispers before she was accepted. The redhead couldn’t help smiling.

“Huh, I guess that’s the last of them. I might have to lower my standards,” Ootori-sama declared as another girl collapsed panting and sweating on the edge of the court.

“C-c-captain! What about me? Y-you said I’d get to try out after helping as a team manager all last semester... d-do you hate me?” the girl who had been handing her balls all practice exclaimed, bursting into tears.

The captain looked rather annoyed, and let out a frustrated sigh. “Fine, sure. We’ll see if you’ve improved any.”
“Thank you!” the girl cheered, before running across to the other side of the court.

Captain Jun waited for the girl to get into position. She shook her head as she realised the girl’s stance was far too weak. Still, she had promised.

“Serve!” Jun shouted, lobbing the ball across to the girl.

Trying to bump the ball towards the team member standing in the setter’s position, the girl accidentally sent the ball flying wide. With the ball arcing awkwardly through the air, the girls in the crowd began to grow excited that it might land in the hands of any of them. They’d get to return it to Ootori-sempai, and get her personal attention!

“Oh,” Hibari said, slightly surprised as the ball fell into her hands. “Don’t worry, I’ll send it back!”

Tossing the ball up lightly, Hibari pulled her other arm back before slamming into the ball with a graceful serve. The thunder-like crack as the blonde’s hand slammed into the ball was followed a split second later by a second crack as the volleyball collided with the court floor and smashed through the wooden structure.

When the dust cleared, the volleyball team was scattered across the court, panting from their mad dash out of the way of Hibari’s volley. As well, most of the girls in the gym were staring over (or up) at Hibari.

“Heh, oops. Sorry,” the blonde said nervously. It was only then that she realised Captain Ootori was nowhere to be seen...

“That was the best serve I’ve seen all year,” Jun said softly, suddenly, at most, half a metre behind Hibari.

“Oh. You’re fast,” Hibari replied as she turned around, amazed the older girl had made it up to the second level so quickly.

Jun took Hibari’s hands in hers and brought them together, as if she were making an intimate romantic proposal. “Would you care to join the volleyball team?”

“Woah! Hey! Give her some space pal,” Ranma declared, elbowing her way between the two of them. “Don’t be getting so chummy with my fiancée!”

Jun blinked in confusion as she looked back and forth between the two (incredibly cute) girls. They were engaged? But how could...

“You’re Saotome Ranma and Oozora Hibari, aren’t you?”

“What’s it to ya?” Ranma asked.

“I’ve heard about some of your exploits... you both would make amazing members for my team,” Jun replied. “What do you say?”

Ranma gave the handsome girl a judgment glare. “If ya’ve heard about me, then ya know that, despite appearance, I ain’t exactly girls’ volleyball material.”

“Don’t worry, we’ll see how you play first, worry about technicalities later,” Jun countered, grabbing both girls by the elbow to lead them off.

“Woah, hey!” Ranma protested. “I said I ain’t joinin’!”
“Let go!” Hibari added. “Ranma can’t play, and I won’t join a club without my fiancée!”

Jun was indignant, not used to hearing ‘no’. Her annoyance was only held back by her uncertainty at how to respond. (And a bit of fluster over how cute these two were.)

“Yo! Oozora, there you are!” a boy’s voice called out from the crowd.

Turning, Hibari saw a blonde boy who was awkwardly navigating through the crowd of girls. He was being very apologetic and trying to give everyone plenty of space. Jun saw him as well, and couldn’t help glaring at him for interrupting.

“Takanashi! Hey, what’s up?”

“I’ve got great news! My bands doing a show for the cultural festival! We really need you to sing though, it would make the performance so much better!” the boy with platinum blonde hair asked.

“Ooh, that sounds fun. Let’s go Ranma, maybe we can get you a spot in the show too!” Hibari declared, grabbing her fiancée’s wrist and following the boy.

Ranma gave Jun a mischievous smirk and a shrug as she followed Hibari. “How can I pass up the chance to be a rockstar?”

The volleyball captain watched their receding forms in shock. She couldn’t let two potential teammates who were that cute just walk away... and, more rationally, she also couldn’t let her team’s best bet at a championship title walk away either.

* * *

Jun sat in her room, lost in thoughts of the two cute girls she... needed to recruit for the volleyball team. Definitely nothing more. Why did Ranma have to really be a boy, though? It wasn’t fair.

“Wait, if Ranma’s a boy, then I’ve finally had my first proper crush,” Jun whispered to herself. She knew she wasn’t a weirdo like her brothers...

* * *

Ranma and Hibari were changing their shoes for the morning when captain Jun strolled up to them. The short haired girl gave Ranma a once over. And then a twice over for good measure, before sighing in disappointment.

“Needed ta see the proof I can't join the team?” Ranma asked.

“I'm still not admitting defeat on that,” Jun snapped. “This was about something else!”

Ranma was preparing a witty retort when a passing student let out a yelp.

“My juice!”

As was inevitable, there was now an annoyed redhead standing with shoes too big for her, juice dripping from her bangs.

“Ew, this smells like tomato, clams, and pineapple. Who drinks that?” Ranma grumbled.

Even with the juice and annoyed expression, Ranma was suddenly too adorable in Jun’s eyes. Especially when complemented by Hibari, who had produced a towel to try to dry Ranma off. Blushing, the volleyball captain spun around and stormed off. She needed to focus if she was going
to make this situation end in her favour.
The mall was quiet as Tsugumi and Kasumi finished with their spice shopping. There were advantages to going at 10am on a Wednesday.

“I must say, it's nice to get out with someone my own age. Thank you,” Kasumi said.

“It was nothing. When you told me how rarely you got out, I thought I'd help out,” Tsugumi replied. “Besides, I benefit too. It’s not selfless.”

Kasumi’s initial reply drifted away as something caught her eye. “Ooh, an end of season swimsuit sale. I do need a new one.”

“I'm not opposed,” Tsugumi replied with a shrug as she followed the (slightly) younger girl into the store area.

The pair picked through the selection, wondering if anything might catch their eye. Tsugumi raised an eyebrow when she noticed the swimsuits Kasumi was looking through.

“Bandeau bikinis? That's quite daring.”

“They're good for tan lines,” Kasumi replied. “Though, the attention it brings can be fun.”

Tsugumi stared down at the revealing swimwear for a moment, debating taking that plunge… and then she saw a very bold option.

Picking up the spandex that caught her eye, Tsugumi gave a smirk. “If I'm going in, why not go all on?”

“Oh my. Those certainly are bold.”

* * *

‘Ran’ sat quietly in the Tendo dojo, doing some cool down stretches after a bit of grappling practice with Akane and Hibari. The first week back to school had gone well enough, and the three had decided Saturday afternoons were a good time for training together now that school was running. Ran smiled, glad to get to learn more of the Tendo style, and to have a new training partner/student (in all fields but grappling, Ranma’s skill advantage was enough to make it effectively a teacher/student situation). The time alone was appreciated as well, while she tried to work out how to broach the Ukyo issue with Hibari.

“H-hi there,” Kousaku said, entering the dojo with a bow.

“Oh, hey,” Ran replied, continuing to stretch. She wondered what Kousaku was up to, the last time she had hung out with him (as a he herself) Kousaku had had more than a few questions as Ranma’s ‘sister’.

“So, uh, I was wondering... are you free Tuesday evening?”

“I guess. Why?” Ran asked, grabbing a towel to pat some of her sweat off.
“There was a movie I was kind of wanting to watch, and I thought you might like to see it with me?”

Kousaku offered nervously.

“Well I—” Ran froze, realising she was about to respond to this as Ranma, not as ‘Ran’. It was a bit confusing to keep the two versions of oneself separate sometimes. “Wouldn’t ya prefer ta hang out with my brother?”

“No. No... it’s not that sort of thing. It’s, um, it’s a romantic comedy,” Kousaku replied, a bit nervous to meet Ran’s eyes.

The short redhead burst into laughter and lightly punched Kousaku’s arm. “Ahah! So you’re embarrassed about liking rom coms? Don’t worry, I-er, Ranma would never judge ya for that.”

“I meant... I meant going to it as a date,” Kousaku blurted. He’d hoped to be casual about this, but it seemed Ran just wasn’t good at the subtle clues.

The girl paled a moment, panic setting in. A cover story was needed. Something ironclad. What could work?

“I’m gay and I have a boyfriend!” Ran blurted.

“Um, pardon?” Kousaku asked, trying to mesh the two parts of the statement together and failing rather thoroughly.

Ran opened her mouth to reply, realised what she’d said, and promptly buried her face in her hands out of sheer embarrassment. She decided to take a bit longer to come up with this explanation. “I... um... the first one is my old default for when a guy asked me and I didn’t dislike him, but wasn’t interested in dating. So, I guess it just became reflex. The second part is true.”

Ran smiled nervously. For a moment there was panic as she wondered how she’d provide a boyfriend if pressed, but then she realised that two of her fiancées made perfectly good boyfriends. Ryoga might be an option too, in a pinch.

“Oh, okay,” Kousaku replied softly. “He’s a lucky guy.”

Ran blinked. “You’re acceptin’ it, just like that?”

“Yeah? I’d kind of be a jerk to not accept your word.”

Ran let out a laugh of relief. “You’re a good dude, Kousaku. Although, if I’m being honest, I thought you liked Akane?”

“I... she is really pretty, and has a smile that can light up a room but kind of scares me. Her and Nabiki both, though in different ways. One’s a hot anger, the other’s a cold anger. You on the other hand, you don’t scare me, it’s almost as easy to hang out with you as it is with the guys... except for the whole bit where you’re a really cute girl.”

“Oh, I’m super hot, I know,” Ran replied with a smile. “I’d tell ya what I look like in a swimsuit, but I think that would count as torture since ya can’t have me.”

“I mean... I wouldn’t stop you,” Kousaku said, trying not to drool.

Ran gave the boy a wink. “Another time maybe.”

* * *
A short distance away, Hibari had decided to give Nabiki an offer, after running her thoughts past Sabu the day before. Knocking on the older girl’s door, it only took a moment for Nabiki to answer.

“Hello Hibari. What are you after?”

“It’s more ‘what are you after’, and whether or not the answer is an interview at my place tomorrow,” Hibari replied with a grin and her best ‘American game show host’ tone.

“Oh?” Nabiki replied, somewhat emotionlessly.

“I’ve heard about your little gambling business. Apparently you manage to make a pretty yen. And then the blackmail... Your kindly older sister apparently worries about you doing these things all alone,” Hibari explained.

“Are you trying to get me to start paying protection fees?” Nabiki asked, glaring at the younger girl.

“Nah,” Hibari replied, waving the question away. “I’m offering you a working relationship with certain benefits. If you can past muster tomorrow.”

Nabiki had to admit to being torn. On one hand, Hibari was being seriously smug and possibly implying threats, making her want to be uncooperative; on another, Nabiki didn’t like the idea of her skills in this field being questioned and dismissed like that and wanted to prove herself; yet, on a third hand (since these were hypothetical hands and Nabiki could have as many as she wanted), there was the added issue of Hibari representing actual yakuza, an opportunity that both enticed and worried the ice queen.

“I’ll sleep on it,” Nabiki lied. She couldn’t let this pass by without at least trying.

“Cool. 11am, tomorrow morning. Bring some of your binders to show us how thorough your work is. Oh, and if you’re more than 10 minutes late it’s cancelled,” Hibari replied with a smile and a wave, before hurrying off down the stairs and calling something out to Akane.

“I hope this isn’t a mistake,” Nabiki muttered to herself once she was sure Hibari was out of hearing range.

* * *

Struggling against the butterflies in her stomach (that, based off their force, surely knew martial arts), Ranma slid the door open between her room and Hibari’s. The taller redhead was relaxing on her bed, reading one of the novels assigned for the semester (and looking like she was at least half through it already).

The sound of Ranma entering caused Hibari to look up from her book and watch as the shorter girl walked across the room and sat at the desk. Hibari sat up and grabbed her bookmark to set the reading aside while waiting for Ranma to start.

Hibari’s relaxed gaze caused Ranma to swallow nervously. Why was it so easy to charge into a fight against Ryoga or Mousse without a moment’s hesitation, but the idea of trying to deal with issues of emotions and romance were so hard? Ranma could only guess it had to come down to Genma telling Ranma to ignore those things so many times in childhood, leaving her with minimal experience... but, she was getting off topic.

“Hibari,” Ranma began, hoping things would get easier as she got the ball rolling, “When... well, ya know when we went on that date with Shui, before we knew she was Shampoo? An’ things were going well fer a bit?”
“Yes?”

“I... bein’ on that with both of ya, er-Well, I guess it’s kinda like how movin’ in here with you and yer sisters opened my eyes ta the idea that there could be more than one person ya cared about as family, and how your life seemed so much richer and warmer for it. Being on that date with the two of ya, it felt like...like having more than one person to care about romantically was just as nice. I don’t think it means I love anybody any less than the normal with one person? At least, I hope it doesn’t mean that. Just, let’s ya share makin’ somebody happy... Anyway... I was wondering if we could, y’know, try that sorta thing again?” Ranma explained, trying not to fidget too much as she worried how this was going to be interpreted. As she waited for Hibari’s reply, she couldn’t help smiling nervously, bracing for this all to blow up in her face.

“So, you’re saying you want to try another date with Shampoo?” Hibari asked, not quite sure where Ranma was going with this.

“I dunno. Maybe it’s her. Maybe it’s Ucchan. I... if I’m bein’ totally honest, maybe it’s Ryoga. I’d say maybe all of ‘em, but I’m pretty sure that would be a disaster waitin’ ta happen,” Ranma replied, her large eyes filled with what could best be described as innocent guilt. “I dunno?”

Hibari wanted to protest. To ask why she wasn’t enough for Ranma. It wasn’t how things were suppose to go, but... a girl who was born physically male and a partner who flickered between both boy and girl in spirit and body wasn’t how it was ‘supposed’ to go either. Plus, if she was being totally honest, she’d felt a bit of what Ranma described when around Shampoo too. While she didn’t feel the need to explore that way, only a mild curiosity, it was enough to know there was honesty in Ranma’s questions.

There was just one ‘little’ issue. This reason she’d been refusing to dwell on the option at all.

“I’m sorry Ranma, but... I can’t,” Hibari began, realising she needed to explain herself better as she saw the pained look on Ranma’s face. “It’s not about if I want to or not. It’s about my dad. In his eyes, Shampoo and Ukyo are both ‘proper’ enough girls and therefore both preferred marriage options for me than you. If I start showing any romantic interest in them... he’ll find a way to kick you out and get me married to one of them by the week’s end at least.”

“That’s nonsense. I’m at least as much of a girl as Ucchan, and Shampoo’s got her curse,” Ranma replied, crossing her arms and pouting.

“I know that, but to my dad they’ve both got the major advantage of being girls from birth,” Hibari replied. “He barely counts you as an option, mostly seeing you as the emergency last resort if he can’t get me to stop being ‘gay’.”

“Has he seen Shui? Shampoo makes nearly as hot a guy as I do.”

“It’s not important to how he sees things, though he’d still prefer I found a more ‘normal’ girl than Shampoo or Ukyo if possible, I’m sure.”

Ranma subconsciously picked a pen up from Hibari’s desk, and began fussing with the lid while trying to think. She didn’t like the idea of losing before she even tried. Especially after managing to talk Ukyo into this. Giving Ukyo instant Nannichuan probably wouldn’t even be enough. Disguises... that was a risky move. Maybe if they went far enough... no, the Oozora group were pretty decent at pursuit and observation.

“If you figure out a work around besides ‘try being sneaky’, then I’m all ears,” Hibari said, as she watched Ranma slipping through what had to be dozens of flawed ideas (going by the shorter girl’s
“Uh... well, there’s still Ryoga?” Ranma offered, honestly not sure how she felt about that. There was a lot of baggage there.

Hibari gave a mischievous smile. “That’s true. He’s certainly cute. I’ll see if I can talk him into it. If we can find him.”

Ranma smiled back, before excusing herself to go take a bath. After the short walk to the furo, she pulled off her clothing, and stepped into the wooden trimmed bathing area. Sitting down in front of the mirror, she made no effort to avert her eyes (as she had done when the curse was new and it felt she was seeing something she shouldn’t). Instead, she watched her reflection’s face as she dumped a bucket of hot water on himself, and saw how that guilty look in his eyes lingered.

This guilt wasn’t the same worry about his desires for a more complicated relationship, but rather the fact a solution had occurred to him that seemed perfectly effective.

Marriage.

If he pushed to marry Hibari now then they’d not have to worry.

And yet, the thought had scared him, when there was no reason for it to.

“I know she deserves better,” Ranma sighed, slipping into the warm tub. “That’s got to be it. I don’t even know if I’d end up being a husband or a wife or both. Hibari’s fought so long, knowing what she is... before I can marry her, I have to figure out my own mess.”

Ranma refused to let himself dig any deeper. He didn’t want to admit there was more fear and confusion that just that. There was a side of him that wanted to settle down, and had enough of the open road, but another side that couldn’t bear the thought of it... two halves quite independent of the usual split of male and female that dominated Ranma’s emotions.

* * *

Nabiki stood in front of the Oozora complex at 10:55am and took a deep breath. It wasn't Kuno Estate large, but the perimeter wall of the lot still surrounded what was a rather substantial city block. Probably 2-3 times the size of the Tendo’s quite large lot. That wasn't the daunting part though. It was the knowledge that ringing that doorbell meant stepping up to a new level of criminality.

Did she want to walk the extreme path, or was it more curiosity that had led her to investigate that option up until now? The way society romanticised Yakuza life?

“Oh! Whatcha doin’ loiterin’ out here?” a man with a prominent scar running down the left side of his face yelled as he stuck his head out from between the doors.

“I have an appointment with Oozora Hibari,” Nabiki replied as coldly as she could, due to her irritation with the man rushing her.

“Oh, yer the 11 o’clock. Sure, c’mon in,” the thug replied, opening the door for her.

Nabiki walked in, and was surprised by how homey the area around the front gate felt. As the thug led her into the genkan, she was impressed by the rather massive cross-section of a tree with 极道 carved into it. It was a reminder that this was a yakuza household, and yet, Nabiki found herself liking the idea of having a smaller version for her own home, only modified to read 天道 instead.
“This way,” the man said, leading Nabiki down a dimly lit hallway.

Somewhere in the household she heard a scream, and couldn’t help swallowing with a bit of... concern. It wasn’t fear, she didn’t feel fear.

After a short walk, the man slid open a door to reveal Hibari with two thugs dressed in crisp suits and dark sunglasses to either side of her. The one Nabiki recognised as the Oozora’s driver from the other night, not that it made him seem less threatening. He had a sharp air about him, and was currently sitting with a katana in a position that Nabiki knew (from her dealings with Tatewaki’s eccentricities) was a pose ready to draw the sword in a moment. The other man seemed unarmed, but was large enough a weapon was almost certainly superfluous. And Hibari... well, she kept her usual casual body language, but had modified it just slightly to have a presence befitting a yakuza boss. Her dress too was appropriate: a loose black yukata with red and white birds (probably larks), a sarashi wrap, a black blazer draped over her shoulders, and dark aviator sunglasses to complete the look.

“You’re on time,” Hibari replied. “That’s good to see.”

Nabiki sat down across from the younger girl, feeling a little uncertain. This had to all be an act, right? But... she had heard that Hibari was supposed to be the inheritor of the Oozora clan leadership. Maybe the usual friendly behaviour from the blonde (or, currently, redhead) was the act? Afterall, why would the third daughter be chosen as an heiress otherwise?

“Did you bring the documents?” the Saby asked, his tone as cold as any Nabiki herself could manage.

“They’re in my bag. Do I pull them out, or pass you the bag? Don’t want you boys getting jumpy,” Nabiki replied, keeping her exterior calm. Inside, well, she was still massively more calm than basically any 17 year old would be in this situation, but her sense of unease was enough to lead to some silent self chastising.

“You can pull them out yourself, I’m open to showing a little trust here,” Hibari replied with a shrug and a smile both filled with smugness.

Nabiki nodded and drew out two binders. Once covered her gambling records from the last semester of first year, another her b-list of blackmail files. Both were clearly marked, ensuring that the examiners knew this wasn’t her best material, that was to be saved for after an agreement was made.

Hibari nodded to Sabu, and the sharp enforcer reached forward and leafed through both binders for a few minutes.

“Seems well organised. Thorough enough,” the man finally said. “Definite potential as a bookkeeper long term.”

Hibari nodded. “So, as I said before, this isn’t about protection fees. However, there are going to be some membership fees if you want to join the Oozora group.”

“Now wait one moment. You’ve seen what I can bring to the table, but what are you offering?” Nabiki shot back coldly. She didn’t like being treated like this was a job interview where the Oozoras held all the power. While she knew they offered muscle, which would be useful in some of her dealings, she wanted to see more before signing up for anything.

“Well, protection is a part of it. As is support for surveillance efforts. We have our own photographic dark room, and can cover film expenses, with a certain quarterly budget allocated towards cameras
and listening equipment. We can cover gas and provide vehicles. There’s some other benefits as well,” Hibari explained.

“That sounds reasonable. I’d like to see the contract first, to know exact monetary rates of course.”

Hibari smiled as the giant thug produced three copies of a contract. Nabiki picked up one and began to read.

“10% of the first 100,000¥ of monthly earnings, 15% for 100,001-1,000,000¥... complete access to dark room once training session is completed... full dental and eyewear coverage... no sharing of Jusenkyo secrets? I guess I’ll find out what that is later... 50% off from attached list of massage parlours, gyms, hostess clubs, restaurants, and tailors...” Nabiki read, before pausing a moment to think it over. “Hm, this is a very extensive list of benefits, and no demands I get my hands dirtier than I’m comfortable with. The rates are reasonable enough too... Very well, I’ll sign.”

The three gang members watched as Nabiki drew a pen from her sack, and placed her name on all three copies of the contract (after quickly checking that they were identical).

“Haha! Great!” Hibari replied, bursting into a smile and shedding her previous cold demeanor as she pulled out a pen and signed the witness spot. “You’ve got the afternoon off, right? We like to throw a barbecue for new members. Tsugumi went out and bought a bunch of things your big sis said were your favourites yesterday.”

Nabiki’s eye twitched slightly at the tonal whiplash. This girl was going to give Nabiki headaches, she was certain of it. The chance to observe from inside for a bit wasn’t something she wanted to pass up however. “Yeah, sure. I’m not really the party type, but I can stay.”

“Excellent, I’ve got the band coming over to run through some rehearsals too, so there’ll be live music,” Hibari replied happily.

Nabiki grimaced. Was this yakuza group really so casual?

* * *

Nabiki sat quietly, leaning against a tree near the exterior Oozora koi pond, watching the goings on of the household. Currently, Hibari (now wearing a loud outfit worthy of Cyndi Lauper) was yelling at the band members and various thugs who were trying to set up a small stage. Tsugumi was visible over in the kitchen, cooking up a storm with the help of Sabu and Ran. (Nabiki did have to admit the way the normally frightening yakuza enforcer kept blushing whenever the eldest Oozora brushed past amused her.)

Shifting her attention to Suzume, who was currently passing a soccer ball back and forth with a surprisingly intelligent acting piglet, Nabiki felt an odd sense of calm. The Oozoras seemed to really know how to make someone feel at home. (The dark room had been very nice too, she was definitely going to make use of that. As well, some of the bugging devices were coming home with her, there was a lot of blackmail potential in those.)

The only ones not participating in the festivities to some degree were the fathers (both of whom seemed oddly annoyed when Nabiki had seen them off drinking in a side room), Tsubame, who’d confirmed her wish to avoid the family business, and Ranma who had been surprisingly completely absent. Nabiki could only assume he was out doing... something.

As if on cue, a band member suddenly let out a shout: “Oi! Ranma, get over here! You’re helping with the show aren’t ya?”
Nabiki slightly raised an eyebrow when she realised the guy had shouted towards the kitchen, which she could see only had three people in it. She raised a second eyebrow when Ran hurried out from the kitchen.

“Alright, alright, I’m comin’! I just wanted ta help with the cookin’ a little, since Hibari had ta keep an eye on you doofuses,” Ranma replied, hurrying over.

Nabiki was fully confused, and deeply curious. With years of practiced stealth, originally honed as a way to acquire extra cookies as a child, she approached to better listen in.

“Wait, before we start, are we going sexy redhead, or heartthrob guy Ranma for the show?” the blond guitarist asked.

Ranma shrugged. “I still ain’t great at the bass, so, I figure girl mode is better. I’ve got more ‘cute’ factor goin’ on ta help balance lack of skill.”

“Good to hear,” the guitarist replied. “Leaves me the handsomest guy in on the stage.”

“If your gonna be like that, I might just go guy mode to annoy ya,” the short redhead replied, sticking her tongue out.

Nabiki needed answers. Scanning the field, she felt Suzume might be her best bet for them. Slipping away from the argument, she soon made her way over to the young blue haired girl.

“Suzu-chan, I have a little question for you,” Nabiki said in her best ‘dealing with children’ tone.

“You don’t need to patronise me. I’m plenty mature,” Suzume replied curtly as she grabbed ahold of her soccer ball.

Nabiki smiled awkwardly, while Co-chan slipped between the two of them and began to glare at Nabiki.

“Sorry, kid. Don’t tend to deal outside the high school age bracket much these days,” Nabiki replied. “Anyhow, it’s about Ran and Ranma... or maybe just Ranma? Overheard a conversation that was a little confusing.”

“Oohhh. Yep. It can be confusing, but there’s really only Ranma. Just, sometimes Ranma’s a girl, and sometimes he’s a boy. He got a magic curse in China. Uncle Genma got one and turns into a panda! But, I don’t know if he’s a panda at heart or not... Oh, and Shampoo turns into a boy, but she isn’t really a boy. Unlike Ranma, who’s sometimes really a girl. Even when she isn’t turned into one, though that’s rare because it’s easier for her to go girl and she’s still kind of shy about that option and likes to hide it. Big sis Hibari helped me understand all of it, and said she understands it better than Ranma,” Suzume explained, very proud of herself for knowing so many details.

Nabiki stared at the little bluenette, unsure how to process what she’d just heard. Magic curses? People turning into animals? Or switching sexes? Maybe a kid wasn’t the best person to ask, sometimes they were more honest, but sometimes they had crazy ideas.

Suzume suddenly scooped her piglet (letting her soccer ball fall away) and held him up at Nabiki with a big grin. “Oh! And-and Co-chan’s really Ranma’s nemesis from middle school! I-wait, I wasn’t supposed to let him know I knew that...”

The piglet began to squeal nervously, trying to turn to get a look at the girl holding him.

Suzume smiled at the piglet a bit awkwardly. “Sorry, but big sis told me because she wanted to make
Sure you didn’t do anything weird. But I wasn’t supposed to tell you so that it remained a test of your behaviour.”

Nabiki glanced around nervously, wondering if this girl was more eccentric than most her age (while her pet piglet looked surprisingly betrayed by this apparent revelation). Maybe it was time to go grill Tsubame again, that girl seemed like the weakest link in the family...

Suddenly Nabiki was greeted by the sight of quite possibly the most handsome guy she had ever seen leaping in from over an exterior wall. The boy turned and smiled a surprisingly innocent smile before rushing over her way.

“Nihao! You must be Tendo Nabiki, yes?” the new arrival asked in Mandarin accented Japanese.

“Yes,” Nabiki replied, trying to be cautious after the wave of fairy tales she’d just gotten off what she’d believed to be a sensible youth. “And you are?”

“Have you signed contract?” the handsome boy asked.

“Yes?”

“Ah, good. Then you saw ‘no the sharing of the Jusenkyo secrets’ clause?”

“Yes. I wasn’t really sure what it referred to though?”

“Curses, obviously,” the mysterious boy replied.

“Wait... really?” Nabiki asked, trying to keep her tone from sounding too doubting.

“Mhm! Some of us more secret that others. Ranma mostly in open. Dumb panda not care any. Mousse not protected. I am, though.”

“Oh, and you are?” Nabiki asked, still not sure what to make of this. Was that girl really telling the truth? (Glancing over, she saw that Suzume was apparently engaged in a heartfelt apology to her pig, who occasionally ‘bweed’ in replies that the bluenette apparently understood.)

“Outside circle, am Liu Shui. Student at Wakaba, and waiter at Neko hanten. For those in know, am really Shampoo, Nujiezu warrior and waitress at Neko Hanten. Though, also I am things Shui is mean to be.”

“You’re a girl? Nabiki asked, struggle to balance this statement with the handsome form that made it.

“Come! We go to the kitchen and I show you. Supposed to help with cooking anyway!” Shui declared, grabbing Nabiki by the hand and leading her off.

Nabiki wanted to glare at the boy... or girl. She was not the type to be dragged around. However, this mysterious person’s iron grip made her decide quiet politeness was the best route (for now).

The jaunt to the kitchen was short, and Tsugumi seemed unsurprised by the new arrival. Shui quickly pulled Nabiki over to the sink, and finally let go of her hand. As Nabiki flexed her fingers to restore blood flow, Shui turned on the hot water in the sink. After filling a glass, Shui dumped the contents on herself, quickly shifting to her birth form.

As Nabiki watched the boy turn girl, she was struck by two thoughts: ‘Magic is real’ and ‘Yep, I’m bisexual’. The latter thought she dismissed, due to its lack of relevance to the current situation.

“Very interesting,” Nabiki commented, her tone flat and measured.
Akane was patting her hair down with a towel as she walked out of the bath. It was annoying how long it took for her hair to dry, but that was one of the trade-offs of femininity. Walking past the family room, she peered over, wondering what Nabiki would be watching now, only to find Kousaku in front of the TV.

“You managed to get the money for Nabiki’s TV access fee?” Akane asked.

“Huh?” Kousaku asked, having been engrossed in the latest Dragon Ball. “Nah, she’s out somewhere. TV was free for once.”

Nabiki being out on a Sunday was unusual enough to make Akane curious. Normally her sister used Sunday as plotting and homework day, while also keeping guard of the television, lest anyone be willing to pay her for access. Akane headed upstairs and knocked on Kasumi’s door frame, sure that her eldest sister would have the answers.

“Oh, hello Akane. Did you need anything?” Kasumi asked, looking up from the virology textbook she’d been reading.

“I was just wondering you knew where Nabiki was? Thinking back, I remember she was up at 9, which really isn’t her Sunday schedule.”

“Of course. She has a very important meeting with the Oozora Group today, so she’s going to be out most of the day, if all goes well,” Kasumi replied calmly.

“Th-the Oozora Group? Like, criminally?” Akane asked, wondering how on earth Kasumi was letting this happen.

“Well, if we’re being perfectly fair, Nabiki’s already quite the criminal. In all honesty, I hope the Oozoras will be a good influence on her, as they seem like generally decent people. Daddy is doing business with them already too.”

Akane felt like her jaw had hit the floor, discovering that Kasumi supported something like this. “I... I’m going to go lie down.”

* * *

The band rehearsal had been surprisingly pleasant. Even if most of the members were clearly amateurs, Hibari’s singing and dancing seemed worthy of a professional, and Ranma’s bass playing was better than the pigtailed teen gave herself credit for. Music was one of the luxuries Nabiki had always been fond of splurging on, so she appreciated a free show.

The food had been good too. Her love of sweet potato tempura and chicken katsu had been thoroughly satisfied. Picking at the dessert buffet provided, Nabiki found herself next to a currently female Ranma. Watching the redhead for a moment, a realisation hit her.

“Right, I can’t tell my sisters and Kousaku about you,” Nabiki said, half to herself.

“Is that gonna be a problem?” Ranma asked, feeling worried about the risk of losing her new friends.

“No. Not at all,” Nabiki replied, grabbing a cream puff. “I’m certain there’s going to be some good comedy from it all.”

“You seem like you’re a very carin’ sister,” Ranma muttered sarcastically while shovelling some
assorted sweets onto her plate.

Nabiki couldn’t help smiling an evil grin. “You don’t know the half of it.”

Chapter End Notes

Setting things up can get complicated with so many characters in the air.
Romance on the Shores

The rush of the audience cheering and the bright stage lights made Ranma's heart race. While she wasn't centre stage, Hibari and the lead guitarist were sharing that theoretically (in reality, Hibari was hard at work stealing the show), Ranma still felt nervous about her own playing. Like every eye was on her. Plus the bass guitar was just so much bigger in girl mode, it was a strange shift. Ranma would have been doubting the choice to play as a girl, but the outfit was just so much more fun than the boy mode option had been.

As their song wrapped up, Hibari rushed over to Ranma's side and kissed the shorter redhead on the cheek. Needless to say, the crowd went wild as Ranma blushed furiously.

With that, their time on stage was finished. Ranma hurried over to help roll the drum off the stage while the school chairman Akashi strolled onto stage, clapping away.

“Now that the musical number is finished, there's just one announcement left for the main stage: the winner of the Mister and Miss Wakaba competition!”

With a dramatic flourish, the short man held out his hand and a nervous member of the student council hurried out and handed him a plain white envelope.

“The winner of Miss Wakaba is… first year Oozora Hibari!”

Ranma let out a breath she'd not realised she'd been holding while Hibari blinked in surprise.

“Me? Really?” Hibari asked as she stepped forward.

The pigtailed teen behind her struggle with an odd mix of being proud of her and yet also envious.

“And, for Mister Wakaba... it's another first year! What a surprise!”

Ranma took in another deep breath. Maybe this would be the win. It was, logically, the more likely option.

“Liu Shui!”

A surprised ‘aiyah’ erupted from the audience before the handsome cursed teen wiggled up to the stage. As Shui smiled and waved at the crowd from beside Hibari, Ranma was suffering a confidence crisis just off stage. Staring aimlessly into space, she nearly missed the next part.

“Now, before we crown the winners, we've got a special third category this year. With the highest number of total votes, and providing a clean sweep to the First Years: Saotome Ranma!”

“Wait? Really?” Ranma asked, running out onto the stage, beaming away.

Members of the student council came out to crown and give each a royal cape while the gathered audience cheered.

“Normally I'd say: what a lovely couple they'd make, but I suppose ‘trio’ is the going term this year,” the chairman said, laughing at his own ‘wit’.

* * *

As they walked off from school, Ukyo couldn't help pouting. The other three were still wearing the
plastic crowns they'd been given. Shui’s having won the Mr. Wakaba portion was what really riled Ukyo up. Apart from Looks in cursed form... Shampoo was the least masculine person Ukyo knew.

“Are you guys going to wear those all day?” the chef snapped, mainly glaring at Shui.

The other three nodded, smiling away.

“This school is so messed up, Shampoo winning ‘Mr Wakaba’... It's just wrong,” Ukyo grumbled.

“I heard you weren't far behind you know,” Hibari replied.

Ukyo blushed, “Wait, really? I... well, I guess some of the girls have taste.”

Beaming away, Ukyo waved goodbye before heading off to work.

Once the chef was gone, Shui turned to Hibari with a puzzled look.

“How did you find that out?”

“I didn't. Just wanted to get her to stop complaining,” Hibari replied with a shrug.

Ranma was left silently wondering about Ukyo’s priorities. The chef seemed to be getting more and more upset with Shampoo’s lack of masculinity. Why was she the target? Shouldn’t Ukyo be butting heads with Hibari instead?

* * *

“Class, I have some excellent news! Next Wednesday we’ll be having a field trip to Kamakura,” Iwasaki-sensei announced. “The morning will be spent visiting assorted historic shrines and temples. The afternoon will be a free time at the beach, though there will be guided acti-”

The rest of her explanation was lost below the sounds of cheering as students grew excited about the trip. In the chaos, Hibari noticed a concerned look on Ukyo’s face, and decided she’d make a little peace offering. After a few minutes of chaos the students calmed down a bit and Iwasaki-sensei’s voice could be heard again, having apparently been explaining things the whole time.

“-a couple chaperones are needed. If there’s any volunteers, please let me know for tomorrow.”

* * *

Tsugumi sat in the yard, quietly reading through a book on 17th century French artistic movements, enjoying the sun. With her sisters coming home any minute, she knew this relaxing afternoon was coming to an end.

“Sis!” Hibari’s voice called out.

Turning to follow the voice, Tsugumi spotted Hibari and Ranma walking along the external lot wall. Ranma’s arrival had lead to Hibari’s arrival home becoming rather less predictable.

“We’re having a field trip next Wednesday, and they need chaperones. Would you be able to help out?”

“Wednesday? Hm... I think I’m free. Where are you going?” Tsugumi asked, putting a bookmark in place before standing up.

“Down to Kamakura. We’re seeing temples an’ the beach,” a currently male Ranma replied happily.
“I’ll get to show off my sweet swimsuit bod.”

“Ooh, the beach. That does sound nice,” Tsugumi replied. “I’ll be happy to help out.”

* * *

The one downside to the field trip was that the students had to gather an hour earlier than usual. As they stood around waiting for their shuttle bus, Ranma was getting some stares for her current appearance. Being female didn’t surprise anyone that much anymore, but the purple eyeliner, red skirt with white floral pattern, and baggy white button-up shirt combined to such a thoroughly feminine look that few of the two classes on the trip knew how to respond to. Shiina was having an especially hard time with it.

“He’s just gone full girl,” the boxer muttered to himself. “I... how can I be the rival to a girl?”

His nervous muttering was just loud enough for Hibari and Ranma to overhear and giggle over, while Rie tried her best not to join in too much. The two redheads knew this would be fun. Tsugumi, from her vantage point conversing with Iwasaki-sensei and the other teacher present, could tell the two were up to something, but she’d planned to keep an eye on them anyway.

“Ohoh, Shui told me the teacher was young, but you seem barely out of school yourself,” Cologne announced as she bounded up to the other adults.

Iwasaki-sensei blushed at the comment. “You flatter me too much, Cologne-san. And you were too kind, closing your restaurant for the day to chaperone.”

“Wednesdays are usually rather quiet anyway, and I’m always happy to get in a trip to the beach,” Cologne replied happily.

Across the waiting area, Ranma couldn’t help raising an eyebrow at Cologne’s presence. In her experience, the ancient woman always had an angle.

“Huh, I wonder what the bus across the parking lot is for?” Rie asked, half to herself.

“Volleyball team is having practice somewhere,” Kaori rudely declared as she walked past. “Anyone not part Oozora and Saotome’s bubble would know that.”

“Oh. I’ve never been good at keeping up with school news anyway,” Rie mumbled, feeling self-conscious.


* * *

The temples had been interesting to Ranma for the first hour or so, but she’d grown rather bored by the end of it. The way Hibari had remained focused had surprised her. Ranma had spent enough time in musty old temples and dojos as a kid that there wasn’t any thrill left in it for her, but she supposed Hibari’s more normal life had left them being still fresh to the other girl.

Now though, they were free. Reaching the beach, Ranma took in a deep breath to enjoy the ocean air. After the moment just enjoying the scent, she began to unbutton her shirt. She couldn’t help smiling at the way most of the boys on the trip were staring, no doubt expecting Ranma’s traditional lack of feminine modesty. They were clearly more than a little disappointed to discover Ranma had been wearing her swimsuit underneath her clothing, though the faux-two piece was still revealing enough to make more than a few blush.
When they noticed Hibari appear beside her fiancée in a matching swimsuit there were more than a couple of nosebleeds.

“You two seem to have many admirers,” Shui said while walking up to the two of them.

“Certainly makes a girl feel good,” Ranma replied with a large grin.

“How much would you boys pay to see us kiss?” Hibari shouted towards the crowd.

A wave of boys approached waving bills as they moved forward

“Gah! What’re ya doin’?” Ranma protested, grabbing her fiancée’s upper arm to help get into closer whispering range.

“Well, I’d kiss you for free, but if we can get a bit of cash out of it then why not?” Hibari whispered back, while grabbing any cash in range.

“I... er, it just...” Ranma stammered. Turning a profit on this somehow felt wrong, yet... it wasn’t like the money was going towards making Ranma do anything she didn’t want to. And Hibari was raking in quite a lot of dough.

“Ooh, 9 735 yen. Pretty good,” Hibari said, stuffing the cash into her bag. “Let me consult with my dear partner on just what that buys you all.”

The taller redhead turned and leaned to whisper into Ranma’s ear. “How do you feel about frenching?”

Ranma blushed furiously, turning with mouth open in shock. Hibari however read the expression a little differently and dove into it.

“Oh no, three boys have fainted, and we need a lot of tissues for all these bloody noses,” Ranma heard Tsugumi say as she herself struggled with the shock of what happened. “I hope this won’t happen too many times today.”

“Ah, it’s just a bit of fun si-Oooh, sis! Nice swimsuit!” Hibari said, her sound of surprise causing Ranma regain some composure and turn towards the eldest Oozora.

Tsugumi looked nothing short of stunning. With her long midnight green hair and slightly pear body shape she would turn a few heads in almost anything, but a tiger stripe bandeau bikini turned her into a complete attention magnet.

“Y-you don’t think it’s too much, do you? I kind of bought it on a whim, but now I’m not so sure,” Tsugumi replied.

“It will certainly make chaperoning easy, since almost all the boys will be following you around,” Shui said, laughing a bit.

Ranma nodded, a bit speechless to see the regularly maternal Tsugumi in something that bold. These emotions were further confused when she took in the sight of Shui in very tight and short burgundy swim trunks. While Ranma wasn’t going to say that Shui was the most attractive male form she’d ever seen (she insisted that title belonged to herself), the pigtailed teen had to admit that either of Shampoo’s forms left her a little flustered.

Deciding to sneak away from the boys suddenly crowding around Tsugumi, the three went to find a free spot on the beach. After they set up a parasol and some towels, Shui was called away by
Cologne, who wanted help with something.

“I gotta feel bad fer Ucchan,” Ranma said. “Havin’ ta miss out on swimmin’ like this.”

“Who said I was missing out on anything?”

Ranma spun around to see Ukyo walking over... and looking distinctly male in a pair of casual yellow swim trunks and nothing else. As Ranma stared in confusion at Ukyo’s currently masculine chest Hibari couldn’t help laughing.

“It’s just a bit of Jusenkyo powder, Ranma,” Hibari said.

“Oh! Right. Yeah, that makes sense,” Ranma replied, trying and failing in an effort not to stare at Ukyo’s chest. “So, uh... ya seem comfortable without a shirt?”

“To be honest, this is pretty nice. Wrapping isn’t fun,” Ukyo replied. “Been enjoying easier breathing all day.”

“Wait, ya’ve been in guy form all day? Ya change less than Hibari,” Ranma said, taking in the chef’s face now.

“Hibari and I discussed it. To help cover up the slight increase in my height, I came to school in male form from the start today,” Ukyo replied.

“Yeah, we kind of have to give each other space,” Hibari added, sliding over to stand beside Ukyo. “See, I’m shorter when we’re both using Jusenkyo. Not by much, but I think people might notice the height switch.”

“Dang, we’re a confusin’ group, ain’t we?” Ranma said, laughing a bit. “Speakin’ of, shouldn’t Shui be back by now?”

“You’re right,” Hibari replied as the trio turned to look for her.

What they found was Shui about 10m away, surrounded by girls asking for tanning lotion application. The cursed girl was smiling away, while complimenting various girls on their swimsuits. It was a mutually beneficial relationship. The girls saw a hot ‘guy’ who was ‘clearly’ gay and ready to give them non-threatening attention. Shui got to be surrounded by cute girls.

“She’s going to be a while, isn’t she?” Ukyo asked.

“Definitely,” Hibari replied. “Well, I’m going to rent a surfboard, wanna join me?”

“That could be fun. Whaddya think, Ucchan?”

“Sure, worth trying. Training by the sea I always thought it looked like fun,” Ukyo said.

The trio set off towards the the surfboard rental shack, chatting a bit about school and coming up assignments. Ukyo drifted back a bit, enjoying the view of Ranma from behind. The conversation came to a very awkward halt however as they rounded the corner of the rental shack and saw the attendant, dressed in a cute frilly one piece..

“Tsubasa!? the trio yelped.

“Yea-You two? And U-Ukyo?” Tsubasa blurted. “Perverts! Get away from her!”

With the shout, Tsubasa lunged over the counter, between Ranma and Hibari, to tackle Ukyo. “I’ll
Tsubasa leapt back, staring down in horror at Ukyo’s currently male form. After a moment more of incomprehensible stuttering, he promptly fainted standing up.

“I think we broke him,” Ukyo said, poking Tsubasa in the shoulder. “Wish I could’ve done this years ago.”

“This is too good of an opportunity,” Hibari added, pulling a water bottle out from her bag. “It’s for your own good, Kurenai.”

Before the other two could wonder what she was up to, she uncapped it and poured a bit onto Tsubasa. The brunette shifted, growing slightly shorter, hair shifting to a dark near black colour, and surprisingly generous curves appearing.

“Bwah! What just... why do I-are those boobs? How did I get those?” Tsubasa yelped, the shock of shifting reviving him a little.

“Dang, you’ve got good genes. I’m envious,” Hibari replied, leaning forward a bit to get a look. “Not quite as big as Ranma’s, but still pretty good.”

“Not quite? I’m way better built,” Ranma snapped defensively. A quick glare from Hibari made her sweat a little. “N-not that there’s anythin’ wrong with a smaller chest. Honestly, that’s real cute in its own way...”

“I could definitely mess with some guys with-wait a minute! You’re trying to distract me from what you did to the beautiful Ukyo!” Tsubasa shouted, grabbing Hibari by the shoulders. “I’m not about to forgive you!”

“I agreed to it, you dork,” Ukyo said. “I attend school as a guy. I couldn’t come to this field trip in a bikini, could I?”

“I, well... no... but...” Tsubasa stammered, letting go of a mildly annoyed Hibari.

“See, there’s nothing perverted about it, you dolt,” Ukyo replied calmly, flicking Tsubasa on the side of the head.

“I guess... but I’m going to stay with you all day to make sure they don’t do anything improper!” Tsubasa declared, bounding over to Ukyo’s side. “They’re guys afterall, and can’t be trusted around a precious angel like you.”

“Er, physically I’m the only guy in this group right now,” Ukyo replied a bit nervously.

“T-that doesn’t matter!” Tsubasa snapped back, latching onto Ukyo’s arm.

As Ukyo’s soul seemed to be escaping, Tsubasa began to grin from ear to ear.

“So, are we still goin’ surfing, or not?” Ranma asked, just accepting that they wouldn’t escape Tsubasa any time soon.

“Oh! You guys wanted to surf? Yeah! Let’s go! I can give you tutorials. I had to get trained to run this booth afterall,” Tsubasa replied happily.

* * *

Shui had at last finished the quite enjoyable task of lotioning up at least half the girls on the field trip,
and was now left looking for the others. A few moments of searching later, the cursed girl spotted
them out on the water surfing. Shui hurried off to get a board to join them, only to find the rental
shack closed.

Annoyed, Shui decided to head back to the towels the others had set up, decided to work on her tan
(having a male cursed form certainly made topless sunbathing easier to get away with in this
country). It looked like Ukyo had found a different girl to flirt with, so Shui didn’t have to worry
about protecting Ranma and Hibari from the Kyotoite’s meddling.

“Shui? That’s you right?” a voice called out.

Turning, she saw it was Rie asking. What was odd was that the girl was perhaps 2m away, yet
seemed quite unsure.

“Yes, is me?”

“Oh good,” Rie replied, sliding over and sitting down beside Shui. She shifted to a quieter tone after
sitting. “Since we’re swimming today, I had to take my contacts out. So... I can’t see well.”

“You very mature about it. Unlike someone I know,” Shui replied.

“Shampoo! I came to help you out!” Mousse’s voice suddenly declared. Before Shui could respond,
he’d crossed the space from where he’d been standing and grabbed Rie by the hand. “I didn’t have
anything to do with the restaurant being closed for the day, so I decided to come and help you in case
those two tried anything. I’m so glad to see you didn’t go-hmphrp!”

Shui moved quickly to block Mousse’s mouth. “That was not Shampoo. Put on glasses. Shampoo
did not come on trip.”

Mousse’s eyes filled with terror for a moment, due to Shui’s ice cold tone. Well, that and the way
Shui was pressed against Mousse’s back, which made obvious certain aspects of her cursed form’s
anatomy. Mousse gave a nervous nod and Shui removed her hand.

“S-sorry. I had thought she’d come with Cologne. I... I wonder where she’s gone,” Mousse
stammered.

Any further chastising by Shui was cut off by the sound of a girl screeching. “Gah! There’s a body
out there!!!”

* * *

Floating. Thirst. Hot, but cold.

That was everything right now.

Then there was a slap on his cheek and Kousaku opened his eyes. Above him he saw two people.
Both had red hair. Slowly the shapes coalesced into Ran and Hibari... and they were wearing
matching swimsuits that left little to the imagination.

“Cool. I made it to heaven,” Kousaku muttered, before fainting.

* * *

Hibari was applying a wet towel to Kousaku’s deeply sunburnt head, while Tsugumi and Cologne
discussed whether or not the boy needed medical attention. Tsugumi said he looked like he’d been
out in the sun for hours at least, maybe even a day. He also wasn’t dressed for the water at all,
wear clothing more appropriate for hiking than anything else. Most of the regular cast of teens
were gathered about as well, curious about why an acquaintance had washed up on the shore.

“Hey, what’s he holdin’,” Ranma asked as she realised the boy was grasping something against his
chest.

Hibari, being closest to him, gently lifted Kousaku’s arm, revealing a golden bracelet with three
pearls (or similar gems) that ranged from near white to a dark blue.

“That... that’s the Ài wán shǒuliàn. The Love Pill Bracelet,” Cologne gasped, before hopping down
to Kousaku’s side. The ancient woman placed a gentle hand on the sunburnt boy’s shoulder (Ranma
swore she sensed a movement of chi), waking him so she could ask a question. “Young boy, where
did you find this bracelet?”

“Huh? I... the old creep,” Kousaku mumbled, clearly still exhausted and half awake at best. “He wuz
 goin’ through his backpack. Tried rememberin’ what it was, got distracted... tripped on a rock.
Dropped it of a cliff an inta the water... threw me in after ta get it.”

No more information was coming as Kousaku fell back asleep.

“Old creep? Do any of you know who that could be? It’s quite unusual for a treasure of my people to
be in Japan,” Cologne asked, turning primarily to Ranma and Hibari.

“Prob’ly pops’ old master. He’s a creep, an’ ancient. Been draggin’ Kousaku off on trainin’
exercises, since he thinks martial arts ain’t fer girls... an’ he ain’t sure what I count as,” Ranma
explained.

“Am curious,” Shui asked while crouched down beside Kousaku. “What is special about bracelet? Is
magic? Or just nice name?”

“It’s magical, my child. The one pill will make a person fall in love with a member of the opposite
sex for a moment. A second makes them fall in love for a day. The third makes them fall in love for
life,” Cologne explained. “I forget which is which though.”

Shui looked down at the bracelet and swallowed. Love for life. With that... either Ranma or Hibari
would be hers. But only one or the other. Both wasn’t an option. And both was the only outcome
Shui wanted.

Others in the crowd however had far more singular goals, as suddenly Ukyo, Tsubasa, and Mousse
rushed forward to each grab a pill.

“Ranchan! It’s for your own good!”

“No! Ukyo! Take this instead!”

“Shampoo! Anyone but those two perverts is better!”

Ranma’s efforts to dodge Ukyo were thankfully made easier by Ukyo’s own need to dodge Tsubasa,
though she did end up tripping over Rie (who, for her part, was confused why Mousse kept insisting
Shampoo was around). Shui meanwhile went for the simple option of hitting Mousse with an
 uppercut.

“Stupid Mousse!” Shui shouted, while the pill in Mousse’s hand went flying into the air.
Several sets of eyes followed the pill as it flew, wondering where it would land. As she realised it was headed her way, Tsugumi let out a brief ‘oh’ as she tried to move to catch it in her hand. Unfortunately, instead she caught it in her slightly ajar mouth, and, in surprise, swallowed.

“Aiyah!” Shui yelped, leaping to tackle the eldest Oozora. “Be careful! Do not look at any men!”

“Sure I... did I ever tell you how handsome you are?” Tsugumi asked, a pink blush rising up on her cheeks.

Everyone froze, wondering which pill that had been. Ukyo saw no point in using anything but the lifetime pill on Ranma. Tsubasa similarly hoped that would be the pill he held to give to Ukyo.

“Oh. I had been curious about if Jusenkyo counted,” Cologne whispered to herself, before bounding over to a confused Shui and infatuated Tsugumi. Placing her hand on Oozora girl’s forehead, Cologne took a moment to read her chi before smiling. “Good news everyone, this was only the day pill.”

Hearing that one of the two weaker pills had been removed from the mix caused Tsubasa and Ukyo to both smile and restarted their confused chase, Ukyo after Ranma and Tsubasa after Ukyo. Mousse and Hibari both charged after them, Hibari hoping to protect Ranma, while Mousse hoped to grab a pill to try again with Shui.

“Ucchan! This ain’t the way ta go about things!” Ranma yelped as the chef tried to tackle her.

“It isn’t ideal, but I love you and I’m not going to lose you!” Ukyo shouted back.

“No! Love me instead!” Tsubasa shouted, lunging for a tackle on the chef.

Ukyo was able to dodge Tsubasa, if only barely. Doing an awkward pirouette to regain forward momentum, the chef was soon chasing after Ranma with barely a moment lost. Tsubasa meanwhile was left picking himself up off the sand.

“Ow, my chest hurts. Why would belly flopping on sand... oh right,” Tsubasa mumbled as he stood up. “Who’d of thought boobs had a drawback.”

“It’s mine!” Mousse shouted, tackling the still distracted Tsubasa. “I need that pill to free Shampoo!”

“No you don’t! This is mine to win Ukyo!” Tsubasa hissed, kicking the taller boy in the head as he tried to scramble out of the grapple.

Unfortunately that failed to dislodge Mousse, who was used to significant abuse, and the awkward grapple continued. As limbs flew, and Tsubasa’s disdain for men flared up, eventually the inevitable bit of bad luck occurred. The pill Tsubasa had been holding slipped into Mousse’s mouth as they argued.

Tsubasa froze in terror as Mousse’s mind was rapidly rewritten by magic. The Chinese lad blinked a few times before slipping on his glasses and smiling like an idiot.

“So beautiful! Oh, how was I blinded by one as tainted as Shampoo and I overlooked a beauty like you!” Mousse declared, sliding in and attempting to kiss Tsubasa.

“I’m a guy you creep! And I only like girls! Get off of me!” the disguise loving teen shouted, filling with an outrage that empowered him to clock Mousse in the cheek hard enough to send him flying. “Gotta hide! Gotta hide!”
“Come back to me! I’ll respect you in a way these Japanese men don’t!”

Tsubasa, running as fast as he could manage with his legs a bit shorter than usual, let out a primal screech while trying to make to the safety of water. He’d hid a shark disguise in there, not too far away, and with the scuba gear included he’d surely escape this crazed Mousse. Sifting through the water, he was distracted by the surprising sound of a distressed cat. Turning around, Tsubasa was deeply confused by the fact there was now a black cat tangled up in what looked like Mousse’s robes.

“Where did you come from little fellow?” Tsubasa asked, picking up the slightly wet cat and holding it against himself. “You’re a cute little thing though. Oh, and very friendly, purring away.”

Tsubasa decided to carry the cat away from the water a bit and go see if he could find an owner when suddenly it began to hiss and scratched at him until it escaped his grip. Landing a metre or so away neko-Mousse turned, gave a strange growl, before scurrying off with his tail low and body language defensive. He was severely embarrassed by the effects of the love pill, and more than a little frightened by the way a crush seemed to be lingering on him.

* * *

Captain Jun glanced around the beach a bit distracted from her game. The 1st years on their field trip were supposed to be at this same beach, but she still hadn’t caught a glimpse of either Hibari or Ranma. Was it too much to ask for a chance to see them in swimsuits? Sighing, she halfheartedly spiked the volleyball into the ground on the other side of the court, causing an explosion of sand.

“This was a waste,” Jun muttered.

“Ucchan, stop and think about what yer doin’!”

Jun turned, and was delighted to see the angelic sight of both the girls she’d fallen for running her way. Sure, that Kuonji boy was involved, but she could ignore that and focus on the cute redheads in matching swimwear.

“Come on Ranchan, it’ll just take a second!”

“She already said no!” Hibari shouted from a couple metres behind.

Jun didn’t know what Kuonji was doing, but if it involved harassing the two beauties then Jun was going to put a stop to it. And maybe throw in a little flare that would make her mother proud. Charging over, she managed to interject herself between Ranma and Ukyo, and took a pose befitting of an otokoyaku actress on stage.

“Now stop right there you-” Jun began, only to be plowed into by chef who didn’t have enough stopping space on the loose sand.

As the pair collided and tumbled, the pill in Ukyo’s hand flew into the air, only to fall into Jun’s mouth as she yelped from the impact. Ukyo, sprawled above the volleyball captain, stared down in worry. Jun, for her part, stuck her tongue out briefly, unhappy with the taste in her mouth. After gagging briefly, she locked eyes with Ukyo.

“I... I’m sorry. I didn’t-” Ukyo began to stutter, only to be cut off by a rather angry Jun.

“Get off me, you pervert! Chasing girls around! Tackling me and lying on top of me! You weirdo!” Jun shouted, kneeling Ukyo in the groin to get herself free.
Ranma and Hibari walked over, both as confused as Ukyo had been (pain had currently taken over Ukyo’s emotions).

“I... but shouldn’t the pill have made her fall in love?” Ranma asked, turning to Hibari.

The taller redhead thought it over a moment, while watching Jun get to her feet and try to brush off some sand.

With a grin, Hibari gave a snap of her fingers and turned to Ranma. “Of course! She’s 100% lesbian. That’s gotta be it. The pill has to work by amplifying existing attraction, I’ll bet.”

“Huh, but Ucchan’s... y’know,” Ranma replied in a whisper.

“Can’t change that Jun sees a boy,” Hibari whispered back, before turning to address Jun. “What are you guys doing here anyway? I thought you were training, not having a day off?”

“This is training,” captain Jun replied confidently. “I felt that changing things up and playing beach volleyball would be a good way to test the team’s adaptability.”

“Wasn’t she muttering about how much she wanted to see Saotome and Oozora in bathing suits the whole bus ride?” a team member commented to another.

“I was not!” Jun shouted, turning to her team. “This was about practice! Seeing them looking cute is just a side benefit! The goal is to recruit them to the team!!”

“Uh, well, I have to go help my sister with something,” Hibari replied, grabbing Ranma by the hand. “Maybe another time.”

As the two redheads waved and ran off Jun felt her eye twitching. All this effort and she only got to see them for about 30 seconds.

* * *

Finally arriving back at the Oozora home, Shui was feeling quite tired. Tsugumi had been clingy the whole trip back, and had been getting a lot of stares due to her having only put on a loose button up blouse that she had not buttoned in the slightest, keeping her swimsuit very visible. (Ranma had clearly found the whole situation rather amusing, however Hibari remained quite concerned about her eldest sister.)

“What’s going on here?” Ibari asked as the three teens had tried to sneak upstairs with Tsugumi in the hopes to avoid the Oozora patriarch.

“I’ve fallen in love daddy and I’m going to ma-mrphf” Tsugumi began, before her mouth was covered by Hibari.

“There was slight incident with magic. Don’t worry though, is temporary,” Shui replied with a reassuring smile.

“One day, and then she’ll be back to normal,” Ranma added, also giving an innocent grin.

“Magical... fine. If it lasts any longer though, there will be trouble,” Ibari replied. What vengeance he could get, he had no idea. Shampoo and her great grandmother honestly scared him. And attempts to deal with Hibari or Ranma always ended in failure. Deflated, he decided to go find Genma and vent about the mess his life had become. (The elder Saotome had become a remarkably good friend these past few months.)
The three teens decided to head towards the kitchen instead, realising that dinner was going to have to be prepared, and with Tsugumi’s head in the clouds it would take the three of them a while. Tsugumi, for her part, was happy to go wherever Shui lead.

“Wait! Pill makes one fall in love with opposite sex. Let’s get hot water!” Shui said happily, hurrying over to the sink.

Once the water had heated, Shui splashed herself and returned to birth form. Walking back to Tsugumi, she and the other two waited nervously for Tsugumi’s response.

“Aww... you went back to girl mode,” Tsugumi muttered. “I prefer handsome, but I’ll work with cute for your sake, dear.”

As Tsugumi grabbed her into another tight hug Shampoo the younger girl pushed her away. “No. You are not airen, and you will not care tomorrow. Please stop.”

“But why can’t I be an airen?” Tsugumi asked. “Oh, it’s such a cute word too!”

A deflated Shampoo let Tsugumi pull her into a hug, while mumbling about how she liked the word airen.

* * *

Tsubasa closed the door to his bedroom and took a moment to stare at his reflection. The effect of that Chinese magic certainly had a cute end result. It would save so much time on his morning preparations... but no, wasn’t the point of dressing cute every day to hone his disguise skills?

Well, maybe he could just see how long this form would stay.
Ukyo was dressed. The door was right there. But opening it... facing Ranma again after what happened on the beach... that was too much. It had been a spur of the moment decision made from desperation. And it may have just ruined everything.

“What the heck was I thinking?” Ukyo sighed, head banging against the frame of the door.

Months of intensive therapy would reveal it largely stemmed from abandonment issues sparked by Ukyo’s father’s constant efforts to get rid of his child. Learning he’d been willing to give up his Yatai to be free of fatherhood had led to some very repressed trauma.

Unfortunately Ukyo had not, at this point, been to any therapy, and was unlikely to in the foreseeable future. This, of course, was another in a long line of poor decisions Ukyo had made on top of the core issues of having a terrible father.

* * *

Akane glanced over at Kousaku as they walked to school, feeling a bit worried about him. He’d shown up the previous evening, dropped off by a mummy of a woman, with his face severely sunburnt and signs of what Kasumi had said was acute dehydration. A worried trip to Dr. Tofu’s had revealed that Kasumi’s assessment had been fairly accurate, but the doctor was fairly certain some rest and a good amount of fluids would be enough.

“You should have stayed at home, you know,” Akane said as they neared the gates to Furinkan High School.

“Meh, I keep missing days thanks to that old creep. I need to be here as much as possible,” Kousaku replied, his voice a bit raspy.

Akane shrugged and kept walking. The boy being a fool wasn’t her job to fix.

“Tendo! Face me in the arena of love!”

“Seriously, Kuno? How many months have I been beating you up? Can’t you accept I hate your guts?” Akane shouted as she handed her book bag to Kousaku.

Akane shifted into a loose fighting stance, something she’d adopted from her new sparring partners, and waited for Kuno to strike. As he’d been doing lately, Kuno took a rapid jab as his opener. Akane swerved to the side, before dropping to attempt a leg sweep. Kuno stepped back, barely dodging, and tried to move with another strike. Akane however had the momentum and pushed into him with a flurry of punches to the gut. She kept pressing him, remaining too close for effective bokuto strikes, until he tripped on a bit of uneven ground. As he wobbled towards falling, Akane knocked his feet from under him with a quick kick to the ankle, before pulling his bokuto from his hands.

“You lost! For the... I don’t know, it has to be close to the 100th time! Gah!” Akane shouted, snapping yet another of Kuno’s bokuto’s in her rage.

“Tis merely the 73rd time, fair Akane,” Tatewaki protested.

“’Tis merely the 73rd time, fair Akane,” Tatewaki protested.

“I! Don’t! Care!”

With that Akane turned back to Kousaku, grabbed her bag, and stormed into the school building.
The sunburnt boy was left scrambling to keep up with her, mostly because he found it embarrassing to get left behind.

Upon reaching the classroom the pair were met by several boys in strange costumes. Akane braced for a fight, until she realised there were two girls in the group as well.

“Tendo-kun! We need your help! Furinkan’s hosting the Nerima High School Theatrics Festival this month, and we need you to play the lead!” one of the boys (dressed as Godzilla) declared.

Akane’s eye twitched slightly as she shoved her way through them. “No! It’s not happening!”

“But we’ve all talked about it, and you’re definitely the best choice!” another boy (this one dressed as a traditional Kabuki actor) said.

“Never!” Akane shouted, storming over to flop in her seat.

“What play is it anyhow?” Kousaku asked a girl in a sheep costume.

“Romeo and Juliet,” the girl replied.

“I played Romeo *ONE TIME* in grade school and I’ll never live it down, huh!?” Akane bellowed, grabbing the Godzilla boy by the collar.

“Y-you played Ro-er, but we w-wanted you to be Juliet,” the boy stammered.

“Juliet,” Akane said, almost more as a gasp than speaking. Her eyes glazed over with a look of joy. Suddenly she leapt on her desk and gave a theatrical pose of lamentation.

“'What's in a name? that which we call a rose
By any other name would smell as sweet;
So Romeo would, were he not Romeo call'd,
Retain that dear perfection which he owes
Without that title. Romeo, doff thy name,
And for that name which is no part of thee
Take all myself. ’”

“Never fear, mine Juliet! It is I, your Romeo, with roses in tow!” Kuno declared, bursting into the room with an oversized bouquet of red roses in his arms.

Amazingly, Akane seemed oblivious and continued to recite lines from the play.

“Hey, w-who said y-you’d be Romeo?” a pale and ghoulish lad asked, emerging from a shadowy corner of the classroom Kousaku had somehow never noticed before.

“Is it not obvious? I am the most qualified at this school,” Kuno replied. “As a noble samurai, I doth be perfect for the part.”

“W-well, I want to try out for the part too!” Gosunkugi countered, turning to the club members. “Let me audition!”
“Nay, the part is decided!” Kuno shouted. “The rosy lips of Akane shall be mine!”

“What? N-never. I’ll be... I’ll be the one to kiss her!” Gosunkugi rasped, trying to sign his name onto a script.

“I... I’ll try for the part too!” Kousaku shouted, drawing surprised stares from all (apart for Akane, who was still lost in the joy of being cast as Juliet). Kuno he knew would ruin the play, and Gosunkugi had always seemed creepy around Akane. Maybe he couldn’t protect her in a fight, but he could try to help where he could.

“Thou?” Kuno asked, drawing a new bokuto to point at Kousaku. “What giveth thou the right, sunburnt rogue that doth already slumber in the home of beauteous Akane?”

“W-well, it’s an open audition, right?” Kousaku asked, looking up nervously at the tall kendoist. “And... I think doing a play could be fun?”

“Um, well, we can do some readings as auditions at lunch?” the kabuki dressed drama club member offered.

“Nay! This shalt be decided upon the correct field of battle: the stage itself! Prepare thyseleves, cads, next week it shall be I, Kuno Tatewaki, Blue Thunder of Furinkan, who kisseth fair Akane!”

“On stage?” the Godzilla boy whispered to the kabuki one.

“I guess it’ll be interesting at least,” the kabuki boy sighed. They were going to lose, weren’t they?

* * *

“So, you want to kiss me?” Akane asked, pointing an angry finger at Kousaku when he was about to start his stretches before after school training in the dojo.

“I...what? No. It was those jerks being creeps. I didn’t want to let them ruin the play for you, so I hoped I could stop them. Th-they didn’t seem like they’d audition well, so I thought it would be easy to keep them out,” Kousaku explained, trying to stay calm as Akane glared at him. “I didn’t think Kuno’d decide to turn the play into chaos like that.”

“Well, I’m not kissing you,” Akane snapped at him. He wasn’t anywhere near as bad as Kuno, but Akane worried he was thinking this was a long game of earning her trust, and that his motives were the same. He was a boy after all.

* * *

Hibari was listening to a bit of The Plastics between morning classes on her cassette player, lounging in her seat, when she noticed a few nervous students not from her class gathering around her desk. Pausing the music, she slipped her headphones off.

“Can I help you guys?”

“The regional theatrical festival is coming up, and we need a lead actress for our play,” the one boy explained, before dropping into a humbling bow. “Please, accept the part, so that our school can win.”

“What’s the play?” Hibari asked.

“Sleeping Beauty,” another boy replied, handing her a script.
“Is the part of the prince decided yet?” Hibari asked as she began to flip through the script.

“No, not yet. We figure we’ll get a lot of applicants once you’re announced as the princess though,” a girl explained.

“Hm... I’ll accept on two conditions: 1) you let me do some editing on this script, the dialogue is a little stiff at points, plus the dragon would be almost impossible, and 2) Ranma plays the prince.”

“Huh, wut?” Ranma asked, looking up from his doodlings.

“Saotome? Does he have any acting experience?” the first boy asked.

“Shouldn’t ya have somebody tall playing the leading man?” Shiina asked, having been eavesdropping rather obviously.

“Leave me in charge of training him,” Hibari replied, ignoring Shiina entirely. “I’m not changing my position.”

The drama club members turned and formed a huddle. After a few moments of discussion they turned around and nodded.

“Very well, we accept,” the first boy said. “Ranma can play the part.”

“Wait, what am I doin’?” Ranma asked, still not sure what was happening.

* * *

Shui quietly gathered school books and other supplies at the end of the day, preparing to head back to the Neko Hanten, grab a shower, and then have a long evening of waitressing. Hibari and Ranma had been dragged off by the drama club, so the walk would be quieter than usual. Well, that was the plan, until Shui sensed something brush against her hair and turned to find Rie there.

“Can I help you?” Shui asked.

“I, uh... no, I’m okay,” Rie replied nervously, trying to shrink behind her books. “Um, since Ranma and Hibari are busy, did you want to walk home together?”

“I suppose,” Shui said with a shrug. “You not have work at Ucchan’s?”

“No... I can’t go and work for a guy who’d treat a girl the way Ukyo was treating Ranma at the beach. Or, well, I guess how he treats Ranma might not be how he’d treat a girl exactly, but I think he thinks of Ranma as a girl? I... either way, it was wrong,” Rie explained, obviously deciding to ignore the complications she’d not yet worked out.

Shui just nodded. It was certainly a learning experience to see how upset the whole affair had made Ranma and Hibari. To the Nujiezu any tool was allowed in the battle of courtship. To ignore an option was seen as weakness, or at best lack of enthusiasm. Yet here, the use of magic to rewrite someone’s emotions was viewed with horror and... it made some sense to Shui. Thinking about if Mousse had succeeded left an unpleasant taste in Shui’s mouth.

“It certainly was not best option for spatula boy to choose,” Shui replied, realising Rie was hoping for a conversation.

Rie stared for Shui after that reply, seemingly look for something. What, Shui couldn’t tell, but it led to another awkward silence.
“So, what are you going to do for the night if not working?” Shui asked, trying to be friendly.

“She’s a little bit hungry right now, and I’ve never actually had the chance to go to your family’s restaurant. So, I guess I’ll follow you and grab a bite to eat?”

“Sounds good. Is usually quiet at this time.”

Rie replied with a smile that Shui wasn’t quite sure how to read. The pair engaged in some light small talk on the rest of the walk, mostly concerning upcoming tests or assignments. All the while, Shui felt like Rie had some sort of ulterior motive, but couldn’t work out what.

“Well, we here now. I have work to do in back, but was good to talk,” Shui said, before hurrying off towards the back area.

The cursed girl went to the kitchen, hurried past Cologne, grabbed a waitress’ uniform, and slipped into the washroom for a quick change. Cologne could run the restaurant alone outside of meal rushes, which meant there were no part timers around who Shampoo needed to keep from seeing her change. There was one other person in the back, but he was currently in a kennel meowing pathetically.

“Mousse, stop that,” Shampoo said, shooting an angry glare at the black cat as she walked across the kitchen. “You’re not getting out just from sad meowing.”

As Mousse sighed and curled up to take a nap Shampoo hurried out into the main restaurant area. Luckily Rie was still going through her menu, so she wouldn’t have a bad impression of the restaurant’s service. The girl was a friend of Shampoo’s airen, and therefore deserved good treatment. Also.. sort of a friend of Shampoo’s? Or, more accurately, Shui’s? At least Shampoo hoped that it was going to grow to be a friendship.

“You need any help?” Shampoo asked.

“I think I’ll try the hot and sour noodles?” Rie said, while giving that same odd smile.

“Of course,” Shampoo replied, wondering just what was going on with that girl.

Rie kept smiling as she watched Shampoo head back to the kitchen. That little flower petal she’d stuck in Shui’s hair was still there in Shampoo’s. Her suspicions were correct. What she’d do with that information, she had no idea, but she had it.

* * *

Ranma looked the script over after Hibari handed it to him. “Huh, this is pretty good. Too bad Shiina and Kaori are gonna probably start improvisin’ ta make us look bad though.”

“Hopefully they’ll keep their nonsense to back stage,” Hibari replied, pouting a bit.

“Still, thanks fer thinkin’ I can play the prince. It’s a big part, and I ain’t done much actin’.”

“Well, you learn quick. And I wouldn’t want to have to do a kissing scene with anyone else.”

“K-kissin’ scene?” Ranma yelped, flipping to the back of the script. “A proper kiss in a school play... heh, h-how many people’ll be in the audience?”

“I’m not sure. Probably at least a hundred,” Hibari replied.

Ranma felt like sweating a little, nervous about something so boldly romantic in front of a crowd that
Akane hurried down to answer the door. Glancing at the clock she realised it was probably Hibari and Ran. She’d gotten so sucked into studying her lines for the play she’d almost forgotten about their weekly training session.

Sliding open the front door she was greeted by the pair of smiling redheads.

“Hey there, Akane,” Ran said. “Before we start, we’ve gotta apologise, but there’s some stuff we need to work on, so we’ll have ta call the session short. Just an hour, max.”

“No worries! I have something I need to work on for school too,” Akane replied, smiling happily.

The trio set off for the dojo, Hibari having arrived in casual workout clothes to save having to change. Akane, for her part, had been lounging in shorts and a t-shirt already. And Ran never bothered to change.

After some quick stretching and warming up, Ran started to lead the other two through a quick kata. However, Akane remained firmly behind the pace. After the kata wrapped up Akane waved off Ranma and Hibari’s concerns that she was a bit distracted, insisting she was fine to spar.

The others accepted it, leading to Hibari and Akane going up, giving a bow, and starting their sparring session. Akane was down to a Judo throw by Hibari within thirty seconds.

“Okay. You’re super distracted,” Hibari said as she helped Akane up. “No way should I have gotten you with a throw.”

“Heh, I guess you’re right. I’m just so excited about the play coming up,” Akane replied, a distracted smile spreading across her face.

“Ooh, you’re doing a play too? Is it for the regional comp—of course it’s for that, Furinkan’s hosting,” Hibari said, lightly smacking her head when the realisation hit.

“Which play are you guys doing?” Akane asked.

“Sleepin’ Beauty,” Ran replied. “Hibari’s playin’ the princess and I-er... well, Ranma’s playin’ the prince.”

“Oh, that’s so romantic,” Akane said, turning to Hibari. “Since he’s your fiancé, are you two going to really kiss?”

“Oh definitely,” Hibari replied, sending bedroom eyes Ran’s way, which caused the other girl to blush.

Akane noticed that, and couldn’t understand it.

“What play are you guys doin’?” Ran asked, trying to get past the blushing.

“Romeo and Juliet,” Akane replied happily. “And I get to play Juliet this time. It’s wonderful.”

“This time? Who’dya play last time?”

Akane’s smile twitched a bit. “I... it’s rather embarrassing, but... they made me play Romeo. Ah, but that’s in the past.”
To Hibari that was it: enough for her to feel confident about her theory on Akane. Which meant it was definitely time to tell Akane about Ranma... and herself, if she was being honest. As much as she never wanted to have to reveal that to anyone, if Akane was really the same then there was no need to worry.

“Yeah, I’m so sorry you guys, but I just can’t focus on anything but the play right now,” Akane said. “Let’s meet up first thing after the performances though, how does that sound?”

“Oh, sure,” Ran replied.

“I-uh, okay,” Hibari added. It was fair. They could bring it up after the play. It was only a week.

* * *

“This joint is bigger than I thought,” Ranma muttered, looking around the Furinkan auditorium.

Decorations were up, with posters for various school plays. The seating seemed ready for at least two, maybe three hundred people. The back stage meanwhile was a mess of actors in various costumes, props of all sorts, and judges checking for student IDs.

“And we get to close the show, it’s great,” Hibari added, sliding into her pink and blue Sleeping Beauty dress.

“Wait, we’re goin’ last? Great... I wanted ta get it over with,” Ranma sighed.

“Hibari! It’s good to see you!” Akane’s voice rang out.

She looked quite cute in her Juliet dress, smiling away as she walked over. Hibari and Ranma both waved. Akane was a bit confused at Ranma’s feminine wave, but reasoned that being around all the Oozora girls and Ran maybe he’d picked up on some habits. Honestly, maybe he wouldn’t be too bad, at least as boys went, with that many girls to teach him how to act.

“Nervous?” Hibari asked as Akane grew closer.

“Quite. The play’s probably going to be a disaster whatever I do. I thought Kuno meant they’d compete by having each Romeo candidate do a scene, but apparently he and Gosunkugi are planning a free-for-all,” Akane sighed.

“Yeesh, that stinks,” Ranma replied in a quite feminine tone, forgetting for the moment which form he was in thanks to nerves about the play, and going for what was normal around Akane.

“I, er, yes. It’s going to be a headache,” Akane said, wondering why the boy was acting so odd.

Across the backstage area, two tall teens had met up, easily spotting the other’s poofy hair over the shorter crowd.

“Yo, Tatewaki,” Shiina said with a friendly and casual wave.

“Ah, Makoto. Come for some last minute kendo lessons?” Kuno asked, glancing at the sword at the other lad’s hip.

“Huh? Nah. This is a European fairy tale. So I think I’m just supposed to swing it about all chaotic like, y’know?”

“Western swordsmanship may lack the calm of Kendo, but there is still technique,” Kuno replied coolly.
“Eh, it’s just a play. I’ll improvise. Bigger plan is to get a water gun or two ready. Hoping to embarrass Saotome today. I can’t stand the idea of having to watch him kiss Hibari, that gender flipping little... whatever he is.”

* * *

Akane tried a calming breathing exercise to center herself as she stood on the balcony. Beginning the famous soliloquy she silently thought to herself ‘let the chaos begin’.

“Romeo, Romeo, wherefore art thou Romeo?”

“I am here fair Aka-er, Juliet!” Kuno announced, hurrying onto stage with some sort of paper maché horse around his midsection and Sasuke clamping coconuts behind him.

Akane grimaced and tried to improvise a logical reply from the script.

“What man art thou that thus bescreen’d in night; So stumblest on my counsel?”

“Your Romeo, of course!” Kuno replied.

The audience began to murmur in confusion as Akane struggled with the desire to chuck something at Tatewaki’s head.

“Don’t believe him. I’m your Romeo,” Gosunkugi announced, appearing suddenly from the stone wall behind Akane. He’d done a remarkably good job painting the stone texture onto himself. “I... I could prove with a kiss! I... oh I actually said it. I’m talking to Akane.”

As Gosunkugi happily hugged himself and began a little dance he tripped and fell off of the balcony... onto Tatewaki’s head.

“Yay! A kiss!” someone in the crowd cried out.

Suddenly a chant emerged demanding a kiss.

“I ain’t kissing either of those two!” Akane bellowed.

The crowd began to boo.

“Kiss neither, dear saint, if either thee dislike,” Kousaku said as smoothly as he could while hopping on stage, tied up in ropes.

“How camest thou hither, tell me, and wherefore?” Akane replied, thrilled to have someone following the script a bit. And honestly wondering where he’d been, Kousaku had been missing all morning.

“With love's light wings did I-yeap!” Kousaku yelped as Kuno took a swing at him. Luckily the kendoist hit only rope, freeing Kousaku’s limbs.

“Knave! It is I that be the truest Romeo! Stand and fight me, villain!”

“To such a greeting: villain am I none; Therefore farewell; I see thou know’st me not,” Kousaku yelped as he made a break towards the other end of the stage.

“C’mon! Fight him!” the crowd jeered.

“Romeo’s a lover, not a fighter!” Kousaku yelped as he rolled away from a strike. Quietly, surprised
the dodge worked, he muttered: “Huh, the training’s really paying off.”

Akane watched and wondered if she should intervene. Kousaku could only run for so long, and he could stand up to Kuno for even less time. Glancing around, she tried to find a sword. Or something that could play the role well enough...

Suddenly Ranma ran onto the stage in his Prince Phillip costume, prop sword drawn. “Capulet rogue, invading-”

“Montague!” Hibari’s voice shouted from offstage.

“Er, sorry. Montague rogue, invading our rose garden! Stand and fight me Romeo!” Ranma tried again, pointing the sword at Kuno.

The tall kendoist smirked and turned smirked. “Another who wouldst keep me from my fair Juliet? Have at ye!”

In a few long paces, Kuno had crossed the stage and swung at Ranma, who dodged to the side. The pigtailed martial artist knew his prop sword was no match for his foes bokuto, and made no attempt to parry. Instead he stomped on the taller boy’s foot, causing Kuno to yelp in pain.

“Honourless cur! I shalt have thine head!”

Ranma zipped and dodged around his tall foe, kicking Kuno in the rear and sending him flying off stage.

“Get back here intruder!” Ranma yelled, giving chase.

Across the stage, Kousaku had been staring in shock and his sudden salvation. Only coming to his senses as Ranma ran behind the curtain, turned, and pointed up to Akane to remind the other boy.

“Oh, right!” Kousaku blurted, before turning to climb of the vine decorated rope ladder dangling from the balcony.

“Oh Romeo,” Akane said softly as he reached the top.

“Juliet, thou...thou art as radiant as the sun,” Kousaku said, trying to piece together functional lines from the play. “Would ... wouldst thou accept mine oath of love?”

“Romeo, Do not swear at all; Or, if thou wilt, swear by thy gracious self, Which is the god of my idolatry; And I'll believe thee.”

“Kiss her!” an audience member shouted.

“Th-there’s no kiss in this scene!” Akane shouted, Kousaku giving a similar (but quieter) protest.

“Boo! Kiss! Kiss! Kiss!” the audience cheered.

“What do we do?” Kousaku whispered.

“I guess I can fake it for the play. Put your hand on my cheek, place your thumb over my lip, and kiss that,” Akane answered in her own sharp whisper. “It’s how the pros do it. Well, that or tape, but I didn’t bring any. Just make sure no one sees.”

Kousaku nodded. “Oh, sweet Juliet, let this pilgrim find shelter on you warm and rosy lips.”
He did as told, sliding his hand to her cheek and moving his body just enough to block the view of his thumb covering her lip. Still nervous, he moved forward, trying to give Akane the most innocent and pathetic expression he could manage.

The crowd, for their part went wild, convinced it was a real kiss.

* * *

“Good work you guys,” Ranma cheered as Kousaku and Akane stepped off stage. “From the cheering, I think you might win the competition.”

“Heh... yeah. If you excuse me, I’m going to go ask Nabiki to fake my death so Kuno doesn’t murder me, thinking I really kissed Akane,” Kousaku muttered as he wandered off.

* * *

As the lights came on, Ranma sat in the middle of the stage, covered in stage chains and his mouth gagged. Standing haughtily above him was Kaori in her Maleficent costume, Shiina was to her side in a green and black tunic, while a number of other actors stood around in haphazard ‘goblin’ armour.

“Ohoho, what’s wrong prince? Aren’t you happy with your destiny? You get to be your true love’s hero, waking her from an accursed slumber,” Kaori gestured and a curtain raised, showing a blonde Hibari apparently sleeping peacefully. “That’s right, the peasant girl you fell for and the princess to whom you were betrothed as a boy were one an the same. And you’ll be the one to wake her... in a hundred years!”

As Kaori laughed, two of the ‘goblins’ rushed forward and placed a fake grey beard and long ragged grey wig onto Ranma.

“A little something to help you get into the mindset,” Kaori said, taking a pause to laugh. “Won’t the princess be thrilled by the sight of her true love, looking so dashing after a hundred years in the dungeon? You’ll certainly be trim.”

With that, Kaori sauntered off stage, as the ‘goblins’ danced around poking Ranma with prop spears. Shiina to the side, doing his best to seem in charge, his height certainly helping.

“There’s no way I’d wait a hundred years in these cheap chains,” Ranma declared, pushing to stand. The prop chains proved stronger than expected, and Ranma realised they were in fact not props. Gritting his teeth, he pushed harder, straining his muscles until the chains popped loose from their anchor points and then fell loose. The goblins stepped back nervously, and Shiina found himself sweating a little. He’d expected part one of the plan to hold Ranma a bit longer.

Ranma ripped off the wig and beard, before grabbing the spear from one of the nervous goblins.

“Who’s ready to fight me, hell spawn?”

The goblins screeched and dropped their weapons, fleeing off stage. Leaving Shiina to stand alone, his sword drawn.

“Heh, so you’ve still got fight left in you prince. Good thing the witch gave me a little magic potion to keep you behaving.”

“Magic potion?” Ranma asked, glancing over to see if Hibari could explain this.
Shiina smirked and produced a water pistol. “One splash of this and you won’t be a prince anymore, pal. Can’t wake the princess up then.”

For a moment Ranma wanted to laugh and ignore the threat. Then he remembered Akane was in the audience, and how he and Hibari had agreed the secret needed to be brought up in a controlled manner. Suddenly things were a little more complicated.

“You’ll have to hit me for it to work,” Ranma replied, crouching in with his spear, hoping to knock the water pistol out of Shiina’s hand.

The tall boxer dodged aside, thankful for the speed that training with Kuno had given him. He responded with a spray of water, which Ranma side stepped. The pigtailed teen used the momentum to twirl in an efficient circle and bring the prop spear swinging at Shiina with alarming speed. The boxer yelped and stumbled back, attempting another spray of water. Due to momentum, Ranma nearly stumbled into that one. It was only some last second arm flailing that held him back out of the spray.

“I wanna see what the potion does!” an audience member called out.

“Is it acid? The prince looks pretty scared.”

“I ain’t scared!” Ranma shouted. “I-just a little concerned. I... I got a princess ta save and can’t take any risks for her sake!”

“Will it turn you into a frog?”

“How would they do that on stage?”

“Be quiet and watch!” Ranma shouted, before realising Shiina was taking another shot.

The pigtailed teen smirked, easily dodging this time from a subtle ready stance. This was followed by a graceful leap, landing briefly on Shiina’s outstretched arm, to make him drop the water pistol, before bounding onto the boxer’s head.

“Still gonna try an’ fight me, dark night?” Ranma asked, sitting on the balls of his feet and pushing into Shiina’s scalp with all his weight.

“It’s knight! And I’m not going to let you kiss her in front of all these people!” Shiina shouted, swinging his prop sword at Ranma.

Ranma gave a smirk and leapt back ever so slightly. As he was dropping to behind the taller boy, he gave a double kick into Shiina’s back, sending the lanky boxer stumbling forward offstage.

“Now ta wake the princess,” Ranma announced, turning and heading towards Hibari.

“I think not, prince.” Kaori announced, walking on stage with a rope attached to something above in her hand.

“More magic potions, witch-y face?” Ranma asked.

“It’s the most effective option,” the auburn haired girl replied. “So, are you going to back down and let the snotty princess sleep or-Gyah!”

Koari’s shout was due to Ranma chucking the prop spear at her. She ducked the best she could, but it proved close enough to remove her hat. Unfortunately for Ranma, Kaori did not let go of the rope
as she ducked, and the pull initiated a veritable Rube Goldberg machine of buckets and pulleys above.

Ranma began to dodge, let out surprised gasps at the truly chaotic rush of water, like some sort of backwards game of whack-a-mole. Still it wasn’t enough to really threaten him... and then he saw the bucket begin to pour above where Hibari was ‘sleeping’. Not wanting to have her dress and wig ruined by the water, Ranma leapt over, grabbed his fiancée, and leapt back before the water splashed down.

The audience cheered for once.

“N-now ta wake her with true l-love’s first kiss,” Ranma mumbled, looking down at Hibari in his arms.

“Yes! Another kiss!” the crowd cheered.

Ranma looked up at them, finally noticing just how overflowing the auditorium was. Kissing in front of all those people.

“What’s wrong?” Hibari whispered.

“There’s like three hundred people watchin’... I got a little stage fright,” Ranma whispered back. “Y’know I prefer a more private settin’ fer romance.”

“Just get close, I can take the lead.”

Ranma swallowed nervously, glancing up at the crowd once more. Then he shut his eyes and went forward. As he felt Hibari’s soft breath on his lips he froze up again, but apparently that was close enough for Hibari. He felt her lips on his, then suddenly her arms around his neck.

In the play the kiss broke a spell on the princess, but in reality, as Hibari broke the kiss, Ranma felt like the spell had been lifted from him instead. The part time boy looked down at Hibari, smiled, and went in for a second, more passionate, kiss.

Needless to say, the crowd was loving it.

* * *

“Great work Hibari!” Akane called out as Hibari and Ranma stepped off stage. “I think you guys won. That was certainly quite the kissing. Acting really can’t compare to an actual couple.”

“Kaori and Shiina managed to mess things up less than we’d worried,” Ranma said as the pair approached.

“We should go out for something... I’d say drinks, but I think Ranma’s a little too baby-faced to get in a bar,” Hibari added.

“Hey! I ain’t that baby faced.”

“We could go get burgers,” Akane offered, used to Hibari’s unique views on legality by this point. “Let’s go find Ran and head off.”

“Er, I...” Ranma stuttered, turning to Hibari hoping for help.

“It might be a little hard to find her right now. I’m sure we can get her to join us at the burger place though,” Hibari offred. They just had to get Akane someone a bit quieter so they could discuss the
issue with the delicacy it required.

“If you need aid, I shall give mine humble assistance, as apology for growing distracted and missing your kiss, beauteous Akane,” Kuno announced, strolling up to the group.

“Er, Kuno, you really don’t have to,” Akane replied, hoping she could lose him quickly.

“Nay, I must give recompense. I need only ask one question: what does this ‘Ran’ look like? Perhaps-”

It was then that Hibari noticed the wannabe samurai was holding a plastic water bottle in one hand. At that point everything seemed to crawl to slow motion. As he’d spoken he’d squeezed the bottle, and now the water was splashing out towards Ranma. As it was coming from behind, Ranma wasn’t aware until anything was wrong until the look of fright on Hibari’s face. And then the water hit. All the instant redhead could do was lift a hand to bury her face into out of annoyance.

“-like so?” Kuno said, finishing his sentence.

Akane stared at Ranma in shock. “I... Ran? But that was... and you’re... Why were you dressed up as your brother? And... and kissing Hibari?”

Ranma sighed. “I don’t have a brother. I’m an only child.”

Akane’s confusion only grew. “Th-then... why do you pretend to be a boy? And how do you manage to look that much taller?”

“It’s kind of complicated,” Hibari said, trying to improvise up an excuse that would buy them the necessary time to take the conversation delicately. “You see, she-”

“Hibari, it’s too late,” Ranma said. “We just gotta do it now, like pullin’ off a bandage. Akane, I was born a guy. When I was in China I picked up this curse that turns me inta a girl with cold water.”

“Y-y-you’re a guy!?” Akane shouted, catching the attention of everyone in the backstage area. “I... I trusted you! I nearly took a bath with you! That’s why you liked grappling practice so much, wasn’t it!”

“Wait, what? What’s grapplin’ gotta do with how I was born?” Ranma asked, looking to Hibari in confusion.

“Physical proximity,” Hibari replied flatly. This was all falling apart...

“And you! You knew! You just let me make a fool of myself. I thought we were friends,” Akane shouted, now struggling to hold back tears. “But I was just the butt of some weird joke between you two.”

“It ain’t a joke. I wanted ta try livin’ as a girl, at least part time,” Ranma said, subconsciously moving in front of Hibari to protect the taller girl.

“Living as a girl part time? What the heck does that mean? You’re a boy or you’re a girl! That’s just how the world works!” Akane shot back.

“I thought you’d be a bit more understanding, all things considered,” Hibari countered.

“All things... What? That I used to be a tomboy? That’s totally different from being some kind of... some kind of sex swapping freak!” Akane hissed, tears now rolling down her cheeks as she turned
“Freak?” Hibari muttered, watching Akane run. Her eye twitched slightly, as she decided that maybe it wasn’t that big of a loss then.

“Ah, the innocent heart of a maiden, so easily shattered. Yet... ‘twas better it happen now than later,” Kuno said, smirking confidently to himself. “I could not stand back casually and watch thine perverse game around my love.”

“Pretty soon ya won’t be able ta stand period,” Ranma said coldly, a dark aura forming around her. Suddenly the redhead spun. “Tenshin Amaguriken!”

The barrage of dozens of punches slammed into Kuno’s stomach in the space of a second, causing the kendoist to double over in pain. This lead to a roundhouse kick to the face that sent him stumbling onto the floor.

Still seething with rage, Ranma moved to pounce her foe, when a hand grabbed her arm and stopped her.

“It’s not worth it, Ranma,” Hibari said softly. “Let’s just cut our losses and leave.”

* * *

Kousaku was walking back to his room with a glass of orange juice in hand when he heard crying. It was coming from Akane’s room. He was a little confused, as he’d expected her to head out for an after party (unlike his own hiding from Kuno strategy), and decided to go see what was going on.

Kousaku softly knocked on her door. “Are you okay?”

He heard Akane stomp over to the door and began to worry about his safety. However, her face was covered in tears and run makeup while her expression was clearly more sorrow than anger.

“She was a boy. I thought her and Hibari were my friends, but it was all some game. I bet they wanted to see how long it would take me to clue in. The probably laughed every time they left that I still hadn’t realised it.”

“Wh-who was a boy?” Kousaku asked, trying to ignore the obvious answer.

“Ran,” Akane said softly as she turned away. “She was Ranma.”

Kousaku dropped his glass and took on a thousand metre stare. “Ran was a boy. I asked a guy out on a date...”
A young man in sharp sunglasses emerged from one of Tokyo’s many bus stations under grey and moody skies. With his large pack over one shoulder, army style pants, combat boots, and simple t-shirt revealing toned muscles, it would be clear to anyone paying attention he was a martial artist. He smiled a cold smile, revenge would soon be his.

“Hey pal,” he said to a salaryman walking past. “I’m looking for someone at the Oozora Group’s headquarters. Any idea where that might be?”

“Don’t know, don’t care,” the man said, continuing on his way.

The martial artist sneered at the rude fellow as he left, before turning to a woman nearby. “Hello there miss, I was-”

“Don’t bother me, I’ve got a hair appointment.”

He watched as she hurried off, not paying him a second glance. City people, always so busy. Then he noticed an old woman not far away. She’d probably be more patient.

“Excuse me there ma’am-”

“Beat it punk! I’ve got places to be!” the woman shouted waving her cane at him menacingly.

Scrambling out of her way, the young martial artist felt it begin to rain. Just his luck.

* * *

Hibari and Ranma were sitting quietly at a booth in a small cafe, waiting for the rain to end. At least the milkshake they were sharing was good. Due to their boredom the quiet jingle of the bell over the entrance drew their attention.

“Phew, coming down like cats and dogs out there,” the sunglasses and combat chic wearing boy declared. He was dripping slightly from the rain.

Hibari and Ranma both went back to their discussion about portable music players, seeing no reason to pay any more attention to the new arrival. At least until he decided to sit across from them in the booth.

“Such cute girls, I really picked the right place to get out of the rain.”

The two glared at him.

“There’s plenty a’ other booths, buddy,” Ranma grumbled.

“This one has the best view though,” the guy replied.

“I don’t know, from where we’re sitting it suddenly has the worst view,” Hibari countered.

“Such feisty gals. Just my type.”

“You wanna fight, pal?” Ranma asked, ready to pounce across the table.

“I did come to Tokyo for one, but not with anyone as lovely as yourselves.”
“C’mon Ranma, let’s just go. The rain’s not too bad anymore,” Hibari said, pulling her short date away.

As they reached the door the rude stranger shouted after them. “You girls wouldn’t happen to know where I could find the Oozora group headquarters, would you? There’s a guy there I’m looking to get some revenge on.”

“Not another one,” Ranma sighed quietly.

“Nope, never heard of it,” Hibari replied, before laughing and pulling Ranma out into the rain.

As they left earshot of the building, Ranma couldn’t help but voice a question. “Why’d ya lie ta that guy? If he found out who I am I’d get ta beat the snot outta him.”

“We’ve got places to be. Let him wander around the city a while longer and get even more frustrated.”

“Fine, I’ll beat him up the same whenever he does find the place, I guess... still, wish it hadn’t been raining t’day,” Ranma said, not able to hide the annoyed tone.

Hibari stopped and turned to her cute partner. “Oh? And why not?”

“Well, I said I wuz gonna be yer boyfriend for today. But instead I’m in girl mode and we had a gross dude flirt with both of us...”

“How does being in cursed form stop you from being my boyfriend?” Hibari asked.

“How? ‘Cause I’m a girl right now,” Ranma protested.

Hibari leaned down and looked Ranma right in the eyes. “I’m a blonde right now. Seiji spilled some tea on me this morning. I’m still your girlfriend though... right?”

“Er, well, yeah. Yer always a girl,” Ranma replied nervously.

“And you’re who you are. You might be a little short, and extra baby faced, but you’re my boyfriend.”

Ranma put on an almost comically large grin. “Thanks.”

Ranma then held an elbow out for Hibari to take. Happy to fall into the feminine role whenever she could, Hibari placed her hands around Ranma’s offered elbow. They both knew they’d get some odd looks, but Ranma didn’t typically care what others thought when in cursed mode and Hibari didn’t care if it meant Ranma being romantic.

* * *

Ranma was a bit stunned by the sheer amount and variety of stuff in the electronics store. TVs, some of which seemed impractically large. Segas and Famicoms. Laserdisc, Betamax, and VHS players. Walkmans and discmans. And video cameras, with one hooked up to display what it recorded onto the TVs.

Curious, Ranma went over to camera and began to pose in front of it, glancing up to see the TVs projecting images of a very cute redhead doing rather masculine flexing.

“Whaddya know, I’m on TV,” Ranma said, grinning happily to Hibari.
“Now that’s a show I’d watch,” Hibari replied, laughing a bit.

“Oh, Oozora. It’s good to see you. My sales numbers are a little low this month,” a young sales attendant, maybe a year or two older than them, said as she walked over to the pair.

Ranma tried not to blush too much upon noticing how cute the blonde saleswoman was. And how her outfit did a good job highlighting some very nice legs. Maybe not quite as nice of those of the blonde Ranma had walked in with though.

“Hey, Ibuki! I’m glad you’re working today. My friend here is still very new to all things electronic. You can probably do a better job explaining some things than me. Just don’t go too sales pitch,” Hibari replied.

“Don’t worry Hibari. I’d never oversell to a friend of yours. If you changed stores because of me I’d be fired for sure,” the slightly older blonde replied, laughing a bit. “Plus she’s very cute. A pleasure to meet you, miss...?”

“Ranma,” the redhead replied. “I’m taken though, sorry.”

“Ah, what a shame,” the attendant said. “How about you Oozora? Still going boys only, no matter how I try?”

“Actually,” Hibari began, as she put an arm over Ranma’s shoulder, “I’m a little more flexible these days, but I’m taken too.”

“I knew you weren’t part of the straight and narrow. And now I see you’ve got great taste too,” Ibuki laughed. “So, what were you looking for today?”

“A walkman,” Ranma replied.

“Or a discman, if the anti-skipping tech’s improved enough lately,” Hibari added.

“You as big on martial arts as Hibari is, Ranma?”

“Bigger. I’ve been trainin’ her.”

“Then a walkman is probably the better choice. Discmans are getting better for joggers, but jumping around like you guys do would be too much for it. Come on, I’ll show you our options,” the girl replied.

* * *

Hibari was running through a kata in the dojo, as per her usual morning practice, when she realised Ranma wasn’t giving input. Glancing over, she realised that the red haired cutie was hard at work trying to paint her nails. Hibari paused a moment, quietly watching Ranma, whose tongue was sticking out in concentration.

Smirking, Hibari carefully made her way over to Ranma. She wanted to get as close as she could before the redhead noticed her. Feeling she’d reached the limit, Hibari studied the colour Ranma had chosen.

“Ooh, that’s a very nice robin egg blue.”

Ranma looked up and gave a slightly guilty smile. “Tsugumi said it would fit my colours well.”

“It does. She’s great with colour theory... so, I’ll guess today is definitely a girl day then?”
“Well, at least right now is,” Ranma replied with a shrug.

“I think I’m starting to pick up on how your body language chan-” Hibari began, only to be cut off by the sound of an explosion.

“That was the front gate!” Ranma said as she hopped to her feet and scrambled to see what had happened.

Hibari wasn’t far behind, running through the halls of the Oozora home. Most of the guards were headed that way too, though they spotted Genma running towards a koi pond muttering something about his old master. Ranma dismissed that and kept moving.

Gathering with Ibari and the assorted thugs, both girls were annoyed to see the jerk from the day before standing out in the street, a smug expression on his face and another old fashioned bomb in his hand.

“Who do you think you are, challenging the Oozora Group, kid?” Ibari asked, doing his best to maintain a calm and cold tone.

“A servant of vengeance,” the boy declared theatrically. “I’m here to avenge my father’s honour in a battle of martial arts!”

“You could have knocked,” Ibari muttered. “But, whatever. Seiji, go get Saotome and make sure he isn’t a panda. And you, kid, as long as you stop throwing bombs around you can come in and discuss your grievances.”

“Yeah, alright. I’m going to need eat and rest a bit anyway. I was wandering around all night trying to find the place,” the lad grumbled.

Hibari and Ranma decided to slip to a more hidden position and quietly watch the goings on. They both wanted to know what it was that had this guy so ticked (probably something Genma had done), but didn’t want to get spotted and flirted with.

Ibari, Sabu, and the stranger were walking along the open air hallway along the courtyard when Seiji showed up with a familiar panda.

“S-sorry sir, still waitin’ on the kettle,” the large thug explained.

“Fine, it’ll be ready soon enough,” Ibari muttered. “Anyway, kid, just to get it out of the way: which Saotome are you here to fight? Ranma or Genma?”

“Who-ma? Saotomes?” the pointy sunglasses wearing teen asked.

“You’re not here for a Saotome?” Ibari replied. “Then why are you here?”

The teen hopped over into the courtyard to have room to take up a dramatic pose. “I am Sparta Kotatsu, son of the Spartan Dragon! I’m here to take vengeance on that crossdressing weirdo, Oozora Hibari!”

“Who are you calling a ‘crossdressing weirdo’?” Hibari asked, sauntering over from her hiding spot and glaring at him.


“I live here,” Hibari replied.
“Ah man, what a shame. A cute girl like you having to deal with a weirdo brother.”

“That is Hibari,” Ibari stated flatly.

“Wuh?” Kotatsu asked, turning to see nods from Seiji, Sabu, and the panda. Glancing over at Hibari, she gave him a cocky grin and eyebrow wiggle, and Ranma not far behind giving a confirming shrug. “I...I... b-but...”

The younger Sparta took a couple steps back in fear, only to trip on a lining rock for the koi pond and tumbling backwards into it with a splash.

“Huh, I thought it was just the curse that made me an’ pops fall in there all the time,” Ranma muttered. “I guess it just likes martial artists in general.”

* * *

Kotatsu had been allowed to set up a bed roll in the dojo, and was currently passed out and snoring. Ibari had decided they’d give him a day to rest and eat, wanting Kotatsu in peak form.

The living room however was quite noisy right now, with Hibari not liking this deal at all and making her complaints vocal.

“What do I have to fight him?” Hibari complained. “And why are we feeding him?”

“He gave ya an official letter of challenge,” Ranma replied, wearing the proud smile she’d been wearing since Hibari received the letter. “That means yer honour bound ta fight him. And yer dad’s feed him ‘cause he’s not on your side. But that just means you’ll get a better fight outta this.”

Hibari crossed her arms and leaned back into the couch, thoroughly unimpressed by this whole affair. “Our lunch break is short enough as it is. There’s better things to do with it.”

“I thought ya liked fightin’?” Ranma asked, honestly confused.

“It’s a fun adrenaline rush in the moment, but having to schedule around an official challenge is... bleh. That takes the fun out of it,” Hibari replied.

“Well life ain’t all fun.”

Hibari’s face shifted into a mischievous smile as she leaned towards Ranma. “Maybe not... but we could still head up to our bedrooms to have a little fun right now if you’d like.”

Ranma blushed furiously in response. “Hey! Th-that’s not the sorta thing we should be doin’ right now. You should be trainin’. C’mon, let’s get goin’!”

Hibari giggled as she followed the shorter girl off to train. It was so easy to mess with Ranma.

* * *

By afternoon Kotatsu had woken and was running through practice of his own. He was working on some kicking practices when Ibari and Genma entered the dojo, watching him quietly for a bit.

“You guys just come to watch? Or have you got something to say?” Kotatsu asked as he stopped his practice.

“We’d like to see if you’re any good,” Ibari replied.
“You seem like a determined young man, and I respect that,” Genma added. “I’d like to see if I can give any pointers.”

Kotatsu gave the men a smirk. “Sure, a practice round should help me loosen up.”

He and Genma moved to the centre of the dojo and bowed. Both took up fighting stances and waited a moment, studying the other’s form. As he was planning some instruction, Genma decided to open with a testing jab that the younger Sparta blocked easily. Kotatsu gave a testing counter that was likewise easily blocked.

Smiling, Genma decided it was time to push the kid and launched a rapid series of punches. Kotatsu blocked more than he dodged, doing his best to push into the attack until he could shoot out a hand and grab hold of Genma’s gi.

Pulling on the fabric, Kotatsu yanked Genma forward from his stance while moving in for a knee to the gut. Genma winced at the collision as Ibari called the round.

“So, power over speed, and a focus on grappling,” Genma noted as he stepped back.

“Get in close to the enemy and hit him hard. Our school builds on its Pankration roots,” Kotatsu replied. “Once we’ve got a hold on our foe we don’t let go.”

Genma nodded. “That should be good. Ibari’s boy is too focused on being light and quick. Get a hold of him and it’ll be over. Just be ready, he is very fast. And try to rotate your blocks more.”

Dinner was an absolute disaster as Kotatsu battled with the Saotomes over food. The Oozoras found themselves practically chased from the table, only Hibari holding her ground and playing defensively to get a more human portion of food than the others were after.

“Well, time to get back to training,” Kotatsu announced, annoyed that he’d gotten rather less to eat than he’d have liked. “Remember, tomorrow at noon, girly boy.”

“Did you hear that Ranma? He wants to fight you instead,” Hibari said, poking her fiancée in the cheek.

“I’d love ta wipe the smile off his face, but I’m pretty sure he’s still challengin’ you. He just doesn’t get it.”

“Yes, I’m still challenging Oozora! Though I would prefer if you stopped lounging about in that overly cute girl form of yours, Saotome!” Kotatsu shouted.

“Meh, I don’t feel like changin’ today. Thanks fer callin’ me cute though,” Ranma replied with some batted eyelashes.

Gritting his teeth hard enough that veins became visible on his forehead, Kotatsu stormed off back to the dojo. Genma showed similar annoyance.

Ranma agreed with Hibari’s idea to leave early for school and avoid the battle already erupting around the breakfast table between Genma and Kotatsu. The pair ran along fences and rooftops to swing by the Neko Hanten on their way to school. Shampoo was more than happy to cook up some breakfast for the two of them.
“Oozora, you’d better not be planning to run off. I’ll be waiting for you at the temple down the road come lunch,” Kotatsu sneered.

“She’ll be there, don’t worry pal,” Ranma replied, while Hibari just glared.

“And who are you bud-w-wait, that braid, the Chinese clothing, and that nail polish... Y-you’re Saotome?” Sparta muttered, struggling to fit the guy in front of him together with the redhead from yesterday.

“Nail polish? Whaddya mean-” Ranma paused and looked down as his fingers. “Gah! That stuff’s still there?”

“It does tend to stay for a few days. Longer with a good topcoat,” Hibari explained.

Ranma yanked his backpack open and produced a water bottle to pour on himself. Now female again, she calmed down a little. “Eesh, that coulda been embarassin’.”

Kotatsu stared in horror, pressing his back against the gate. “Don’t do that!”

“Ranma still has problem with being girly in boy mode?” Shui whispered to Hibari.

“I guess so. Got to keep working on that,” Hibari replied.

“What’re you two whisperin’ about?” Ranma asked.

“Don’t worry your cute little butt about it,” Hibari said, patting the shorter teen on the head.

“Stop ignoring me, you perverts!” Kotatsu shouted. “It’s not a good idea to ignore Sparta Kotatsu!”

“Sparta? That is a weird name,” Shui said. “Not sound very Japanese.”

“It’s Greek,” Kotatsu snapped back. “The Spartans were the greatest warriors of the ancient Greek world!”

“I thought that was the Amazons?” Shui asked.

“The Amazons were mythical,” Kotatsu grumbled. “I...bah! Just come to the temple at noon!”

Sparta stormed off, leaving the others to head to class.

Ranma spent much of the morning shuffling notes on strategy to Hibari, who replied with notes of the teacher’s lessons, trying to get Ranma to stop worrying.

When the lunch bell rang Hibari told Ranma to go ahead, and that she just need to change into something more appropriate for the fight. Shui gave her word that she’d make sure Hibari went. Ranma accepted begrudgingly and began hurrying off towards the temple, when a voice called out.

“Ran-chan, can I talk to you a moment?” Ukyo asked, rushing after the shorter teen.

“It’d better be an apology,” Ranma replied, not bothering to turn around. “And it’s taken ya long enough.”

“I’m sorry about that. You and Oozora were running around working on the play rehearsals. And
Rie wasn’t sho-er... no, no excuses. It wasn’t a good move. And neither was what I did at the beach,” Ukyo explained, hurrying along the road after Ranma.

“Understatement a’ the decade there Ucchan.”

“I could tell you a story about abandonment and confusing hormones, and a dozen other things, but... I know that doesn’t matter. What matters is if I can do anything to make it up to you,” Ukyo replied, biting the humility bullet and hoping it would work.

Ranma stopped and turned towards her friend, but couldn’t quite meet the chef’s eyes.

“I don’t know Ucchan. I just... I don’t know if I can feel ready ta trust ya again any time soon,” Ranma replied softly.

Ukyo nodded just enough to be perceptible. “I guess that’s fair.”

“All I can say is: try talkin’ ta Shampoo. I mean, somehow I kinda trust her after all the nonsense she’s pulled,” Ranma replied. “Might just mean it needs a bit more time.”

Having somewhere to be, Ranma waved to Ukyo before hurrying off again. It was a quick run up the stairway to reach the small Shinto temple. Kotatsu was doing some stretches while he waited near the main building.

“Don’t tell me Oozora’s chickened out?” Kotatsu asked.

“She’s coming. She just wanted to get changed inta somethin’ more appropriate for fightin’. Got a friend I can trust makin’ sure,” Ranma replied, walking over to a sit down on a rock nearby. Ranma could feel Kotatsu’s eyes the whole time. “Could ya stop starin’ like that?”

“It’s just not right. A hot babe shouldn’t really be a guy,” Kotatsu muttered.

“I ain’t ‘really a guy’. I’m me. Sometimes that means I’m a guy. Sometimes it means I’m a girl. I’m just sorta new ta the second part,” Ranma countered angrily.

Kotatsu gave a dismissive ‘feh’ and went back to warming up.

As Ranma waited, she began to wonder what was taking Hibari. There was only so much glaring at Sparta she could do before it got annoying to be alone in his presence.

“I don’t think he’s coming,” Kotatsu declared confidently, just as it began to lightly rain.

Ranma was ready to snap at him when they heard the gentle clacks of wooden shoes against stone stairs from the entrance way. Appearing over the hill in a blue furisode was Hibari, her hair was done up and she had a purple traditional paper umbrella in her hand. Shui was a step or two behind her. Considering the complexity of the outfit, Ranma was actually surprised Hibari had made it in so little time.

“What the heck are you wearing, buddy?” Sparta asked, outraged to have his challenge answered in such an over the top manner.

“Your challenge was very traditional. So I thought I’d dress appropriately,” Hibari replied.

“Fine. Whatever. I’ll get my revenge for you giving my old man a nervous breakdown whatever you wear,” Kotatsu shouted.

“A nervous breakdown? Ya didn’t bring that up before,” Ranma said.
“The results were too shameful to bring up before respectable men,” Sparta muttered. “Thinking women’s underwear somehow holds power...”

Ranma and Hibari both made disgusted faces. That sounded a bit like someone else they knew of...

“But that’s why I need to win this!” Kotatsu shouted. “Let’s fight!”

With that, Kotatsu leapt into the air, preparing a flying kick. Hibari replied with a leap of her own, closing the umbrella and swinging it like a sword to smack into Kotatsu’s face and knocking his sunglasses clear off.

His trajectory thrown off, Kotatsu had a somewhat shaky landing not far from the stairs, where he saw Shui smirking at him. He glared back, using the signature small eyed glare of the Sparta clan (now that his sunglasses had been knocked off), though it had minimal effect on Shui.

Hibari’s landing was more graceful, seeing her return to earth not far from an annoyed Ranma.

“What was that?” Ranma asked the taller redhead. “You should be representin’ our school, not pullin’ out Ryoga’s tactics!”

“What’s the school’s name again?” Hibari asked, taking an over the top pose of innocent reflection.

Ranma let out a defeated sigh. “Anything Goes.”

“Mhm. You told me to steal from any martial art I can, and Ryoga’s umbrella-do is fun,” Hibari replied with a wink.

“Quit your gabbing and get back into this fight!” Kotatsu shouted as he charged over, sticking to a ground assault this time.

Hibari lightly jogged to meet him, the umbrella ready like a lance. When they reached striking distance, Hibari thrust the umbrella forward in a jab. Kotatsu dodged, unimpressed; at least until the umbrella popped open with the inertia and his field of view was suddenly nothing but purple. A moment of awkward flailing knocked the umbrella out of his way, but he was rewarded by Hibari’s fist colliding with his face. A flurry of blows at near amaguriken speeds then collided with his torso.

Stumbling back, Kotatsu was surprised by the cocky grin on Hibari’s face. Despite having complained about the formality of it all, now that there was actually a fight she was enjoying herself.

Kotatsu slid into a defensive pose and gave Hibari a Bruce Lee style beckon. Hibari nodded and launched in for another volley. This time, with no umbrella to distract him, Kotatsu was prepared. He managed side step (if just barely) and grabbed a hold of Hibari’s flowing sleeve. The redhead struggled to pull out of his grip, but Kotatsu held the fabric firmly and slammed into her with a number of gut punches from his free hand.

Hibari winced at the pain, but used her own free hand to undo the knot on her obi. Kotatsu wondered why she did that, rather than strike back, when suddenly the fabric he was holding when slack. Hibari effectively leapt from the furisode, revealing an under outfit of a gymnastic leotard as she landed beside Ranma.

Between the tight spandex showing her small, but currently inarguably feminine, chest and way it revealed the full extent of Hibari’s long legs, Kotatsu couldn’t help blushing. That was it. He couldn’t take it anymore.

“O-Oozora! Saotome! I... gah! It’s not fair. You’re both too cute! Let’s let bygones be bygones and
I’ll take you both on a date. I don’t care that you’re really guys,” Kotatsu announced, tossing the furisode to one side and dropping onto his knees.

For his trouble Sparta received three elbows to the head from all three people around him before Ranma and Hibari grabbed him by the shirt and tossed him into a nearby building, where he became embedded in the wall.

“I’m a girl!” Hibari hissed.

“And we’ve already turned ya down!” Ranma added, shaking a fist for good measure. “Ya’d better not bug us again!”
“Akane, please. Every member of the team is injured,” the one girl begged.

The Furinkan Rhythmic Gymnastics team looked a sorry lot in their current state. Various bandages and bruises showed the results of the ambushes they’d suffered. Seated on the floor of Akane’s bedroom looking up at her with pleading eyes Akane felt she couldn’t resist their request.

“I would like to help,” Akane began, “But I don’t really know all that much about gymnastics.”

“Don’t worry! This is a match of martial arts gymnastics!”

Akane blinked in confusion. Why was that a thing? And how did schools in Nerima get away with this stuff anyway?

“It’s simple really,” a girl was explaining, “You use the tools of gymnastics to force your foe from the ring. Even with just your martial arts skills, you’ve got a good shot.”

“I have a week to practice?” Akane paused as the girls nodded. “I’ll do my best to avenge you then.”

“We knew we could count on you!”

* * *

“Waaah!” Akane yelped while the ribbon tied in a knot around her.

She landed on the dojo floor with an unpleasant thud. The tatami mat flooring wasn’t as soft as one might think. Akane had known that from many previous falls throughout her life of course, so there was no surprise there. Untangling herself from the ribbon was proving surprisingly difficult however.
What she’d give to have Hibari or Ran around to help—she froze. How could she think that? After they turned her into the butt of a joke? She was going to manage this herself, even if the tools were a bit tricky. She’d just have to concentrate.

“Are you okay?” Kousaku asked, sliding the door open to check on her.

Then he saw what she was wearing and turned bright red. The leotard left fairly little to the imagination, even with the extra layer of ribbon wrapped around parts of her (if anything, that accentuated the look). His eyes were quickly drawn to Akane’s muscular legs, showing so completely.

“Hey! No staring you perv!” Akane protested as she finally pulled herself free. She didn’t feel like giving him the benefit of the doubt she’d been providing him, not with Ranma’s deception further damaging her opinion of boys.

“I-I wasn’t staring! I swear!” Kousaku replied in a panic. Akane’s icy glare caused him to yelp and turn around. “I just heard a cry and wanted to see if you were okay.”

“Pfet, you were probably peeking the whole time.”

A flustered Kousaku beat a hasty retreat. Akane was clearly in a mood and he knew he wasn’t durable enough to handle more than one of those a week. He made his way to the family room and decided to try to watch some TV. Unfortunately Nabiki chose then to walk in carrying a magazine.

“Very smooth with Akane. I’m sure she’ll be head over heels with you in no time,” the middle Tendo girl said dryly as she found a seat. “I suppose like all the other boys at Furinkan you like the challenge? Most of them have given up by now though.”

Kousaku glared at Nabiki for a few moments, but the icy stare she returned cowed him. Staring at the floor for a moment he composed his thoughts.

“I just want to be friendly. If we’re having to live under the same roof and everything... I thought I was making progress.”

“Doesn’t hurt that she’s cute though, does it?” Nabiki asked with a predatory grin.
“Heh,” Kousaku began, rubbing the back of his neck nervously. “Nah, I suppose it doesn’t.”

Nabiki seemed to lose interest in the conversation and began to read through her magazine. Kousaku barely heard as she muttered under her breath: “Boys. So predictable.”

* * *

Akane was exhausted from struggling in the dojo all afternoon. She just wanted to lie in bed and not move for a couple days. She’d definitely made progress though. Collapsing onto the soft mattress she was about to close her eyes when she noticed something on her ceiling. Or perhaps more technically someone on her ceiling.

The leotard clad girl had propped herself impressively into the ceiling tiles. She held an oversized mallet behind her and a black rose in her mouth. Akane barely had time to be confused before the girl was dropping down towards her (mallet in hand now).

“How on earth are you?” she asked, trying to keep her exhaustion out of her voice.

“I am you opponent. Hebereke’s star gymnast: Kodachi, the Black Rose!” Kodachi declared haughtily. “Now, let us fight in all fairness!”

As Akane dodged the girl’s wild mallet swings she had to wonder how this was supposed to be fair. Then she remembered what the girls on the Furinkan team had said about being ambushed.

“So you’re the coward who only wins fights by ambushing people!” Akane said, while dodging the girl’s attacks. (Training with Ran and Hibari had really paid off, and this was honestly easy.)
“Such a nasty term for it. I merely believe in fighting fairly before the match. It saves everyone time, after all,” Kodachi proclaimed while missing with another mallet swing. “Now... stop dodging!”

Akane had no intention of taking that advice and continued to swerve about her room. Her eyes drifted towards shinai in the corner. It would even out the reach issue, but couldn’t take a blow from that mallet. She had no parrying options.

Then she noticed an opening as Kodachi overprepared a swing and Akane shot in. Moving inside the mallet’s swing arc Akane landed a fist into the taller girl’s gut. Kodachi’s grip on the mallet broke as the blow winded her.

Akane couldn’t help a small smirk. She’d been right. The haughty girl was as fragile her overdone haircut implied.

“So you are good,” Kodachi gasped as she regained her breath. “Well, perhaps another day!”

The tall gymnast produced her ribbon and began to spin it about. Suddenly a storm of black rose petals spread across Akane’s room as a cackling Kodachi leapt out the window.

Seeing her room a disaster Akane rushed over to the window and shouted into the pouring rain: “Do you expect me to have to clean up this mess? You’ll pay for this!”

Kodachi sneered from her position on the Tendo roof, grumbling about the weather. She should have checked the forecast before deciding to launch her little surprise. Fuming she turned to hop home when a small piglet came bounding across the rooftop towards her. The small thing looked lost and wild eyed. The way it moved seemed to imply impossible grace for the animal.

Kodachi was distracted enough by the enigma she failed to dodge and the panicking piglet bounded off her head. Normally she may have tumbled slightly, but with the roof tiles slick from the rain she slipped and began to fall the two storey drop to the ground below.

* * *

Kousaku sighed. Why did they make him take out the trash in the rain? Akane was probably going to be up before collection anyway. Deeply annoyed he was making his way back inside when movement from above caught his attention.
A quite pretty and rather scantily clad girl was falling towards him. Only at the last second as the girl was about to collide with him did his brain realise she was headed his way, and he made a faltering attempt to catch her.

It sort of worked. He successfully broke her fall and she’d technically landed in his arms. Of course he’d landed on his rear in the process, but he hoped it wouldn’t matter too much for first impressions.

Kodachi admitted it wasn’t quite as princely as she might like... but he was quite handsome. And she had caught him off guard. Trying to look up in the pouring rain was probably hard. So it wasn’t too ignoble. Also he was in decent shape, she could feel he was toned under his shirt.

The Black Rose clung onto her new victim and whispered in his ear: “Thank you for saving me from that dangerous situation.”

Kousaku was momentarily stunned. This girl was amazing cute and clinging to him in a way that a girl never had before.

“Um, could you please tell me your name?” Kodachi asked, attempting to sound as innocent as she could. This boy seemed a bit easily overwhelmed. (Still cute though.)

“Sakamoto... Sakamoto Kousaku,” he replied nervously. Something about this situation was giving him an unsettling sense of déja vu.

“Such a noble name Kousaku-sama,” Kodachi said as she produced a bouquet of black flowers.

Kousaku was about to make a complaint that it was meant to be the boy giving the girl flowers when a cloud of powder burst forth from the flowers. Even in the (now lessening) rain enough reached his lungs for him to suddenly grow rigid and numb. Panic filled his heart and eyes as he found himself unable to move.

Kodachi leaned in for a kiss. “Now, kind Kousaku-sama, takes these lips of mine.”

“YOU!!!” Akane’s voice bellowed out.
Akane tossed the mallet that Kodachi had left in her room at the gymnast. It collided with Kodachi’s side and the girl flew clear across the alleyway.

“You can flirt somewhere else! But you’re not welcome around my home!” Akane shouted.

“Adieu, my poor Kousaku-sama!” Kodachi called out as she bounded off down the street, trying not to limp.

Akane glared down at the paralyzed Kousaku. His legs were bent under his body in an uncomfortable angle. It was sort of comedic to be honest.

“You’re pathetic Sakamoto. Falling for any girl you see,” Akane told the boy.

With that Akane stormed off in a huff. A moment later Nabiki and Kasumi appeared.

“Hey there, Sakamoto-kun,” Nabiki laughed, “Legs fall asleep or something?”

Kousaku attempted to say ‘I can’t move’, though what came out was more “A can oo.”

“A kan u? Are you trying to say Akane?” Kasumi asked as she helped lift him. A short glance forced Nabiki to deflate a bit and assist with the grunt labour.

“I would guess ‘I can’t move’, ” Nabiki offered.

* * *

Akane glared as Kuno stood dramatically with a bokuto and bouquet. He somehow thought that his actions at the play had gotten him into her good books and was monologing away about some poetic analogy.

Akane was shifting to fight him when a sudden feeling a danger swelled behind her. Turning she
saw the girl from last night pouncing towards her with a shinai. Akane found the attack quite easy to intercept.

“Would you quit that!? I have enough of people attacking me every morning!” Akane yelled at the now school uniform clad Kodachi.

“I wasn’t attacking you, I merely came to visit Kousaku-sama,” Kodachi replied innocently.

Kousaku paled while he watched from the entrance gate. This girl was cute, but also terrifying. He scrambled and hid behind Nabiki.

“Help,” he squeaked while trying to hide behind her frame which was smaller than his own.

“1 500 yen,” Nabiki replied flatly.

Kousaku was about to complain, but Kodachi was bounding over and he panicked. He shoved the cash into Nabiki’s hand.

“Kousaku-sama!” Kodachi called out while peering at him under Nabiki’s arm, “Are you not happy to see me?”

“He wants me to explain a little complication. You see, Sakamoto already has a girlfriend,” Nabiki explained coldly.

“You? A common harlot attempting to steal my beloved!” Kodachi hissed as she glared at Nabiki.

“No. It’s Akane,” Nabiki replied with a smug grin.

“Wh-” Kodachi began before a louder shout interrupted her.

“WHAT!? ” Akane bellowed.
“My poor little sister is just so shy,” Nabiki explained, “Didn’t want to have it get out. Nor risk poor Sakamoto-kun’s health at the hands of every other boy at Furinkan.”

A number of the male students nearby (or watching for Akane’s fight from the windows) made interested grumblings.

“I’m not sure this is helping ,” Kousaku whispered into Nabiki’s ear.

“Akane, doth this be true?” Tatewaki asked as he approached, “Hath this vile cur trapped you in a mockery of romance?”

“I’m not trapped in anything!” Akane shouted back, not sure if she wanted to glare at Kuno, Kousaku, or her sister the most.

“Harlot!” Kodachi shouted as she charged towards Akane.

Suddenly Kuno slid between the two, his arms out to block Kodachi. “Dare not to touch her sister!”

Every non-Kuno (apart from Nabiki) muttered their shock and surprise.

“Hmph, so this commoner is the target of your misguided infatuation, brother? I suppose she does resemble those photographs you have...”

“Photos!?” Akane blurted. Her glare firmly locked on Nabiki who replied with a casual shrug.

“Commoner!” Kodachi continued, pointing over her brother’s arm. “Let our match be to decide Kousaku-sama’s hand. When I win I shall free him from your grasp.”

“I don’t want his hand! We aren’t dating!” Akane shouted.

Kodachi ignored her and threw a lone black rose towards Kousaku. “Fare thee well my love, until next week and your liberation.”
The boy managed to catch it with surprising grace while they watched Kodachi disappear in a cloud of black rose petals.

“What is with that family and roses?” Kousaku muttered to himself.

“That twisted sister of mine doth be a most unique soul. She doth fall to Cupid’s bow with ease, and once focused she shall take any road to bring said romance to fruition... Do not take thine loss too harshly, Akane,” Kuno explained while handing her his bouquet.

* * *

The match was in only two days and Akane was still struggling. She’d improved significantly, but all these gymnastics tools were still foreign and new to her. At least she had Kousaku around to train with. He wasn’t quite on the level of Kodachi (as best as Akane could determine), but was getting closer these days. Of course, he wasn’t always consistent, as the sound of a juggling pin colliding with his forehead proved.

“How are you supposed to help me if you don’t even try to dodge?” Akane was complaining when she realised Kousaku wasn’t getting back up. “That knocked you out?”

* * *

As he regained consciousness Kousaku realised there was a tissue shoved up his nose. Apparently the impact of that pin had given him a major nosebleed. He also slowly became aware of a feminine presence beside him. It would be lovely to wake up to Akane fussing over him (he was sure she had a softer side, he just had to find it). Kasumi would be nice to see too, even if she was a bit intimidating with the age difference.

Opening his eyes he was rather shocked to see Nabiki... and was that a tiny hint actual concern in her eyes?

“Oh good, you woke up.”

Kousaku held his head as he sat up. He tried to come up with a polite way to ask why it was Nabiki
beside him. The confusion on his face was more obvious than he realised though.

“Kasumi’s busy finishing dinner. She feels horrible not being able to help, but the food will burn if she leaves it right now. And Akane is off fuming. I’d say she’s embarrassed. So I got stuck with nurse duty.”

Kousaku nodded and tried to ignore the pain in his head.

“Kasumi will check you for a concussion later.”

“Uh, right. Thank you though,” Kousaku muttered. He had to be concussed, because right now his brain was telling him Nabiki looked lovely and maybe he could try his luck. At least part of him was functional enough to know that was a terrible idea.

* * *

Akane was coming back from her Sunday morning jog, which was generally twice as long as her usual (and was even longer this time with her match tomorrow), when she spotted an unbelievable sight: Nabiki leaving the house before 9 am on an weekend.

“It’s got to be divine intervention, getting you up this early,” Akane said as she walked up to her still drowsy sister. “That or you’re possessed by a yokai or some sort.”

“How witty,” Nabiki grumbled. “It’s the Oozoras. They had a dark secret they didn’t tell me until after I signed up... they’re morning people .”

Akane scowled at the mention of the Oozoras. “Don’t remind me about them.”

“You asked,” Nabiki replied flatly, before meandering off towards the train station.

* * *

Nabiki nursed the coffee that Tsugumi had given her. At least visiting the Oozoras meant she got to
have some very fine French roast. Hibari, unfortunately, apparently had no concept of slow risers, and had been gabbing away too fast for Nabiki to follow before she’d assimilated enough caffeine.

As Hibari paused to munch down on a bagel, a calmer and slower voice caught Nabiki’s attention.

“Hey, so... er, any chance your sis might be open to talking any time soon?” Ranma’s male voice asked as the handsome boy walked into Nabiki’s field of view.

Nabiki took a moment to enjoy the view, before answering. “Not likely.”

“Bleh, who needs to get on her good side,” Hibari muttered angrily between bights of bagel.

“I’d prefer you to make some effort at peace with her. Otherwise I suspect I’ll be yelled at every time she finds out I’m visiting. And she might complain about dad’s business with your father too,” Nabiki replied dryly, now that her wit had begun to wake up.

“Oh, what’s that?” Tsubame commented as she appeared in the hallway. “That little lying scheme of yours is still backfiring?”

Hikari shot her brunette sister an angry glare. “Fine. For once in my life I made a judgment error, are you happy?”

“For once in your life? What about your reality ignoring insistence about your femininity, little brother?” Tsubame asked smugly... before her face fell as she realized there was a guest present.

Nabiki developed a sinister grin as she turned to see Tsubame and Tsugmi’s pale faces. She then turned back to Hibari, seeing the redhead glaring daggers at her sister.

“What’s all this now?” Nabiki asked in blatantly false innocence.

“Tsubame failing to understand something obvious,” Hibari half hissed, while not breaking her glare at Tsubame. This was followed by her hopping to her feet. “I’m. A. GIRL!”
Nabiki found herself swallowing nervously, and the shout wasn’t even directed at her. Apparently, when truly riled, Hibari’s temper was easily a match for Akane’s. Nabiki decided it might be best not to try to profit off this discovery, not when the Oozoras had the armoury they did. She didn’t quite follow though, which meant she was going to probe.

“So that’s why Suzume said you understood Ranma better than he understood herself?” Nabiki asked, hoping to avoid being in the crossfire of some sibling clash. The Kunos had given her enough of that for a lifetime.

There was a period of silence before Tsubame retreated, muttering what was surely rather rude comments under her breath.

“Mhm, run away you spineless coward,” Hibari fumed, before dropping herself back into her chair and turning to Nabiki. “Yeah, basically. I’ve given the subject way more thought than eye candy here has.”

Hibari punctuated that statement with a kiss on Ranma’s cheek, as the pigtailed boy had slipped into the chair beside her during the confusion.

“It’s good fer both of us,” Ranma replied, blushing a bit. “She helps me figure out the gender-y stuff. I teach her martial arts. We both teach the other con art tricks. It’s all about sharin’.”

“Wait, is this why your red ‘hair dye’ fades so fast sometimes? You’re transforming like Ranma?” Nabiki asked. She had snuck in for photos while Ran(ma) and Hibari had been sparring with Akane once or twice, and knew she’d seen Hibari’s chest looking quite feminine during a toss from Akane.

“Yep. Jusenkyo is pretty wonderful stuff,” Hibari replied calmly. “Now! I had some other stuff I’d wanted to chat about, but I think you’ve got a lot more questions. Let’s hear them.”

* * *

Akane was munching on the lunch Kasumi had given her, staying outside to hold back the scent resulting from her hours of training. Sitting against the exterior wall, she stared up aimlessly at the clouds. She wasn’t too bad with the tools she needed tomorrow. But she was sure she’d be at a disadvantage against Kodachi’s focus on only gymnastic tools.
“You’re a jerk, you know that?” Nabiki said, appearing in her field of view.

“That’s golden, coming from you,” Akane replied. “What’s my supposed crime, that’s got you preparing crocodile tears?”

“Let’s just say that Oozora and Saotome noticed a little loophole in the rules for your match, and agreed to help you despite what you did.”

“What I did!? I’m not the one who lied and got up to perverted nonsense! I don’t want their help,” Akane huffed.

“I guess I’ll just tell our gymnastics team that you failed to avenge them because you let your pride get in the way,” Nabiki replied, before starting to walk away.

Akane’s eye twitched. She really didn’t want help from her former friends but... she wasn’t just doing this match for herself. Sighing, she hopped to her feet and went after Nabiki.

“Fine! What’s this great loophole?”

“Five hundred yen. You missed the window for it being free.”

“Mercenary,” Akane grumbled as she produced the cash.

Nabiki grabbed it swiftly, smiling as she felt the money in her hand. “The rules say no hitting with your body, but they’re very open on what tools you can use. Most contestants use gymnastic equipment because it’s what they know. But almost nothing is actually banned from use.”

“Wait. Really? I’ve been learning to juggle for nothing?”

“Apparently,” Nabiki replied with a shrug.

Akane rushed off to grab her loaned copy of the rule book. Flipping through wildly she realized it was true. Nothing said she had to actually use gymnastic equipment. The only things listed as banned
were explosives, bladed weapons, and chemical agents. There was also a note stating that the use of audience members as weapons was generally frowned upon, but not technically an illegal move. Suddenly her life was so much easier.

* * *

Kousaku made a half decent pack mule, carrying Akane’s assorted equipment into the changing area as Akane and Nabiki walked behind him. The bag was majorly heavy, and she didn’t want to tire herself out before the fight. Changing would have to wait until after he left though.

Walking into the room set aside as the Furinkan ‘Team’ change room, Akane was struck by the amount of space she’d been given.

“Nice little changing area,” Nabiki commented. “Perks of a good school. Anyway, good luck out there.”

“Good luck? You’re actually rooting for me?” Akane asked.

“Of course. Way more people have bet on Kodachi than expected, so I’ll rake in quite a bit more if you’re the winner.”

“Gee, thanks,” Akane grumbled.

“Oh, hey, she left you flowers. That’s nicer than I expected,” Kousaku said as he leaned over to a large bouquet of black roses.

When he got a little too close the flowers erupted in a spray of powder that filled half the room. Nabiki and Akane ran off to the far side of the room, just to be safe, the former cracking a window as an added precaution. As the cloud cleared, the sisters were given the sight of Kousaku frozen in place.

“I han’t oove,” Kousaku said.

“Again, Sakamoto? You’re a bad luck magnet or something,” Nabiki said. “I’ll go get daddy to carry
Akane stepped out towards the arena area, and couldn’t help glaring at Kodachi as she reached the ring. She probably looked awkward with all the martial arts gear strapped to her back, but winning would make up for it.

“Upset that I will be stealing Kousaku-sama away from you, peasant?” Kodachi asked, before breaking into her haughty laugh.

“There’s no stealing to be done!” Akane shouted.

“Such misplaced confidence. Where is my beloved though?”

“Probably in the infirmary after getting a face full of your paralysis powder,” Akane replied with a smirk.

Kodachi paled, an impressive feat with her already porcelain complexion. “I... well, it will wear off shortly! And then he will be rested and ready to receive my affection.”

Akane rolled her eyes. “Yeah, sure, whatever. Let’s just start this fight, okay?”

Kodachi nodded and turned to the referee outside the ring.

“Begin!”

“Let’s see how well those kempo toys hold up to my arsenal,” Kodachi said, smirking before producing a long ribbon.

Akane decided not to waste energy talking and quietly drew a shinai. The long haired Tendo girl charged forward, hoping to take the initiative, only to have Kodachi wrap her ribbon around her shinai. Kodachi then flicked her wrist to pull the weapon from Akane’s grip, but met resistance in the
form of Akane’s impressive grip strength. The two girls were locked in an awkward game of tug of war, until Kodachi let go of her ribbon, causing Akane to tumble back onto her back.

“Ohoho, very elegant,” Kodachi laughed as a held out a hand for a teammate to toss her a ball of some sort.

Kodachi launches the ball in Akane’s direction, and the young Tendo barely rolled out of the way in time as it exploded.

“Hey, wait! Explosives are against the rules!” Akane shouted to the referee.

The ref paused a moment as a diminutive pan in a ninja costume scrambled upto the ring and handed the referee a wad of cash.

“I saw no rule violation,” the referee replied while casually thumbing through the money.

More explosive balls flew Akane’s way, Kodachi having apparently had an arm that could have set her up as a pro baseball player, if the gymnastics didn’t work out. Akane scrambled about between the explosions, having no real response, and just hoping Kodachi had a limited arsenal. Her prayers were answered when the barrage at last ended.

“Hohoho, was good dancing skills you have,” Kodachi said while weighing the options for her next strike. Her eyes landed on a hula hoop and lit up as she motioned for it to be passed to her.

Akane started at the ring of plastic, unsure how it was meant to be a threat, when Kodachi quickly tossed the hoop Akane’s way. In turn Akane moved her shinai to block. A split second into the blocking effort however, and she realised the hula hoop was illegally modified with a thin metallic blade running along its exterior and was going through her shinai with ease. Her eyes growing wide with fear, Akane ducked desperately, feeling the hoop slide mere millimetres above her head. This was followed by a rain of suddenly free hair falling all around her.

In her moment of shock, Akane missed the gasps from the audience (especially the girls). She did notice how her head felt oddly lighter. And that her foe was laughing hysterically.

“You should thank me for the free haircut,” Kodachi said between laughs. Her expression changed very quickly when she realised the glare Akane was giving her.
“You... you... you spoiled, self-centred, egotistical...” Akane paused a moment, trying to work out a strong enough insult. Then it hit her, and she said it all the venom she could manage. “Kuno.”

Trying to retain poise, Kodachi began to back away, before realising she’d gone into a corner. “I... really? You’re going to try to beat me with half a shinai? That seems rather impractic-“

Thwack!

Akane proceeded to hit Kodachi over the head several times with the stubby shinai. The pain from repeated furious blows led the taller girl to curl up, shielding her head with her arms and yelping pained ows. The tattered bamboo had also caught in her hair at times, painfully pulling out whole clumps. When the blows paused, Kodachi found herself confused, looking up nervously at Akane.

“Surrender the match and I’ll let you run away,” Akane said, her face still furious.

“I surrender!” Kodachi yelped, before realizing what she’d said. Her lack of pain tolerance having overpowered her pride. Paling, the tall girl scrambled between the ropes, knowing she wouldn’t be able to show her face at school again any time soon.

The referee stepped over and raised Akane’s hand, announcing the girl the winner. Akane’s mind was in no place to feel victorious however. Her hair was more than hair. It was a commitment to womanhood after a youth of tomboyism. Three years of trying to walk a new road felt like it had just been destroyed.

Akane rushed past the cheering crowd, pulled on pants and a jacket, and ran home.

Chapter End Notes

The fight did not end how I expected to have it go at all.
Ranma was running through general toning with some finger push ups as the stereo over in Hibari’s room played the B-52s. It was good lively music for working out, and he was glad Hibari had given him the idea of using music to make the more boring parts of exercise pass quicker.

The click of the door opening drew his eyes up, and he saw Suzume there, blushing a little as she looked at him. Clearly she was enjoying the rare chance to see him shirtless. Ranma couldn’t help smirking while finishing a couple more push up, getting to a clean 50. He then launched himself up to a standing position and grabbed a towel to get some sweat off.

“Did ya have somethin’ to tell me, or are ya just here to enjoy the view?”

“Oh!” Suzume yelped, her blush shifting to a more embarrassed one. “I... uh, Co-chan is back. Hibari has him out in the dojo with a kettle. Said you’d want to talk to him?”

“Ah, yeah. Thanks,” Ranma said, grabbing his water bottle and pouring a little onto black hair that turned red as the water flowed down. “I think I’ll try on that push up bra Hibari bought me.”

Suzume nodded. Tsugumi had told her she might be pushing close to bra age soon, and so she’d asked Hibari about all the options. She considered herself an expert now, and was certain Ranma was going to be trying to seduce Ryoga. Maybe her and Hibari were going to try for one of those ‘threesome’ things Hibari had gotten shushed by Tsugumi for talking about?

She was lost in her efforts at detective-like reasoning and barely noticed Ranma walked past in a red cheongsam blouse (that almost verged on dress, reaching down to Ranma’s thighs due to her short stature).

* * *

“ Took you long enough,” Hibari said as Ranma reached the dojo.

Hibari had a certain little pig curled up happily on her lap, though Co-chan glared at Ranma as the shorter girl walked in.
“Blame the little blue terror. She’s going to be quite the flirt when she grows up, I’m certain,” Ranma replied with a slight giggle. “So, how’s our handsome guest?”

“He seems happy enough, though I think he’s a little impatient to regain his humanity,” Hibari said, wiggling a kettle sitting beside her.

Co-chan glared briefly at Ranma again, before hopping off Hibari’s lap so she could pour some hot water on him. It was only then that he realised he was about to be naked in front of his crush (again), and began to blush as the transformation hit. Suddenly a black pair of kung-fu pants hit him in the face and he pulled them on before realising that Ranma was suddenly pants-less. Ryoga decided to ignore the odd feeling that came with borrowing Ranma’s clothing.

“Okay, so... what’s going on?” Ryoga asked, trying not to blush as he realised Ranma’s chest looked even larger than usual.

“We’ve got a little deal for you, my handsome friend,” Hibari said, sliding up to Ryoga’s side until she was whispering in his ear. “A very generous offer.”

“W-what kind of offer?” Ryoga stammered.

Suddenly the more curvaceous girl of the pair was on his lap, chest brushing against his.

“Two girlfriends... more or less,” Ranma said, eyelashes fluttering coyly.

“Huh? Wha—how?” Ryoga asked, not quite following.

Hibari leaned her head on Ranma’s shoulder and joined the other in giving Ryoga puppy dog eyes. “We both think you’re handsome. And so, if we both like you, then why wouldn’t we invite you to join our relationship?”

Ryoga’s face contorted into an awkward grimace and his eye twitched slightly. “I... I can’t. I swore I’d only date girls and Ranma... well, you know.”

Suddenly the girl in his lap was staring daggers at him. “What? Am I not enough of a woman for
“What do you think?” Ryoga short back angrily, glaring down at Ranma.

The short girl shoved herself back away from him and leapt into a standing position.

“I’m plenty feminine!” Ranma shouted while delivering a roundhouse to Ryoga’s head that sent the boy flying a couple metres across the dojo.

Before Hibari could stop her, Ranma had stormed out. The remaining girl glared at Ryoga instead, wanting to give him a piece of her mind before leaving.

“Seriously, Hibiki? Have you seen Ranma lately? She’s plenty woman when she wants to be.”

The fanged boy rubbed the side of his head gingerly. “Okay, yeah. I think I misworded that one. Would probably have been better to say Ranma’s too much guy for me. I spend a lot of time alone, thinking. And I realised that I was being a bit of an idiot when I thought I liked guys. I was so wrong about you, as your little sister explained so passionately the last time I was around... and that left only Ranma. And... I think Ranma was always a bit of a part-time girl, y’know?”

Hibari had found herself sitting down again, listening intently. This was actually a thought out reason, not just a knee jerk response of fear, that Ryoga was giving her. She felt the duty to discuss it. “It makes sense. I’d hoped, because I don’t like the idea that so much of what I like about her is the side effect of magic. Kuonji’s just not the most reliable with identifying gender tells, so I didn’t have much to go on.”

Ryoga nodded. “Yeah, I was thinking back on middle school a lot. And I remembered there were days where Ranma would really sway his hips, and just seemed so much more interested in fashion or whatnot. Though he’d always get super defensive and macho if anyone mentioned it. And, I don’t know, maybe I had a crush then, maybe I didn’t, but I definitely have a thing for her now. But only her. And Ranma isn’t always her.”

Hibari nodded. “I remember my own fears early on when Ranma was just showing whispers of girlness and I hadn’t been sure if i could handle that. I proved pretty bi, but I can’t expect that to be true of everyone.”
Ryoga smiled weakly. “Sorry. I do envy you though, I can only imagine how nice it must be to be able to love all of Ranma.”

Hibari smirked. “It’s pretty nice.”

“D-don’t tell Ranma though, please? I know I’d get teased to no end if he found out.”

“Yeah, that’s probably true,” Hibari said, laughing a bit at the thought. “Since you gave me an honest and decent reason, I’ll behave.”

* * *

It was the next afternoon, a bit after school, when Ranma asked to have a makeup tutorial from Hibari and Tsugumi. Makeovers were nice and all, but she wanted the skill to do it herself. It was complicated, and Ranma had to retry a number of times, but she picked it up well enough. Right afterwards she’d done her best to pick out a cute outfit, and decided she’d swing by the Neko Hanten to show off her handiwork. Hibari however found herself drafted into modelling for Tsugumi.

Ranma walked along the streets of Nerima, illuminated by the golden glow of evening, smiling as she went. Knowing the route well, Ranma grew lost in thought as she watched the stars start to poke into visibility as the sun grew fainter and the purple of early night spread across the sky.

At least that was what had her attention. Then she bumped into a boulder of a human being.

“Oh, sorry miss. I wasn’t paying a—Yoiko? Is that you?” Ryoga asked, a bright red blush spreading across his face.

Ranma blinked. How on earth did Ryoga recognize her as Yoiko, but not herself?

She had half a mind to tell him the truth, to make him suffer now, like had been the original plan with the Yoiko plot (before her feelings got muddled)... but she had a clearer goal now. She was going to prove she was enough of a woman to him. No one slighted Saotome Ranma’s femininity and got away with it. (And the way the second rejection had hurt showed Ranma she did still have a crush on the oaf. Apparently she liked her boys muscular, going off him and Shui... who sort of counted. At least aesthetics wise?)
“Hibiki! I was just thinking about you. Are you free tonight?” Ranma asked, cute mode engaged.

“I think so?” Ryoga replied, looking like he was honestly trying to mentally check a schedule.

“Well, this is a special treat. Let’s go get sushi!” Ranma declared, grabbing Ryoga by the hand and rushing off in the opposite direction from the Neko Hanten.

* * *

Ranma buried her face in her hands as Ryoga bit another pair of chopsticks in half as he nervously ate his sushi. How was she supposed to prove her femininity to him if he couldn’t tell wood from seaweed? Swallowing her annoyance, Ranma decided to start up some conversation.

“So, how many dates do we need to go on before I can start telling my friends I have a hunk of a boyfriend?”

“Y-you have a boyfriend?” Ryoga asked, having only half listened.

“If you’re okay with saying we’re a couple,” Ranma said, before picturing a shirtless Ryoga and Shui in seductive poses to help generated a false blush. “Oh, I do hope I don’t seem too forward?”

“Does that mean I could call you my girlfriend?” Ryoga replied, his voice giddy with excitement and, not noticing he’d picked up a soy sauce bottle instead of a roll of sushi, bit into it.

Ranma struggled to remind herself that sticking with this would end in her getting more than she lost by being around him. “Of course, silly.”

“Thanks,” Ryoga replied softly, blushing furiously. Then he took another bite into the soy sauce container. “You know, maybe we should try a different sushi place next time? This one seems to have a lot of crunchy things... and some of it is way too salty.”

Ranma could only give a grimace. She’d have her victory, but at what cost?
Well, at least Ryoga had paid before he’d excused himself to go to the washroom and ended up apparently getting lost.

Shampoo was wrapped in a towel, fresh from her before bed shower, as she checked that her alarm clock was set for the morning. Then something hit the window. Shampoo turned to the closed curtain, wondering if it was a bird or something.

Another thwack.

Shampoo narrowed her eyes. That had better not be Mousse trying to get in after a night on the prowl as a cat. Or that perverted kid hoping she’d look out the window nude again.

Another thwack.

Shampoo sighed and headed over, adjusting her towel up a bit just to annoy any perverts. She didn’t care about being seen, but they cared about seeing. Confident nothing interesting was visible she slide in front of the curtain and opened the window to take a look.

Thwack .

This time the pebble hit her square in the forehead.

“Oh Buddhas and Kami... sorry Shampoo!” Ukyo’s voice shouted up.

“What the heck are you doing down there, Kuonji!? You have a phone! You can call, like normal person. There’s no need to throw the small stones at my window in middle of the night!”
The gakuran clad teen visibly winced. “Sorry. I was just out for a walk, thinking about things, and was passing by.”

Shampoo sighed. “Wait there. I’ll come down.”

Shampoo closed her window before she got a reply and headed downstairs. The restaurant was eerily still as always for this time of night as she crossed it to open the front door.

“That was right qui-Kami! Where’s your clothes, girl?” Ukyo asked, blushing furiously.

Shampoo shrugged. “We’re both girls. I see no reason to dress... you have seen other girls naked, right?”

“Uh...” Ukyo froze a moment. “Oozora as a blonde only, I think.”

Shampoo nodded as she closed the door. “Ah, well, in that case...”

The blue haired girl let her towel drop, giving the other a very good view. Ukyo’s eyes widened before she spun around and grabbed a napkin to cover her nose. “I suppose that’s revenge for the pebble?”

Shampoo blinked. A girl reacting like that to other girls... it seemed downright odd to her. Maybe Ukyo was just a lesbian with a lack of exposure, but...

“So, why are you here, spatula-kun?”

“Ranchan told me she trusts you, even though you’ve tried to kill her and other craziness. So she said I should ask you how to regain her trust,” Ukyo said, doing a very poor job of maintaining eye contact.

“It’s probably the curse,” Shampoo replied. She had a scheme, and was going to lead things where she wanted. “Gives a common ground with both airen. Especially after locking self to try to my prove love.”
Ukyo nodded. “So, get a boy curse and lock myself for a bit? Doesn’t sound to bad... apart for the cost of getting to Qinghai. Any chance I could order Nannichuan water for delivery?”

“Transporting Jusenkyo water is dangerous. Not usually done. Instant and a lock might be enough though? Willing to try?”

“Do you have any ready?” Ukyo asked.

“Mhm. A packet or two. And I know cat’s tongue technique. Follow me, spatula-boy.”

“You know I don’t like that nickname,” Ukyo grumbled while walking behind the very nude and very well proportioned waitress.

Shampoo glanced over her shoulder and smiled. “It is about to become more accurate though, no?”

“I... I guess you’re right.”

* * *

It had been two days. The youngest Tendo had been hiding in her room ever since the fight. Staring at the empty seat at the breakfast table hammered home that Nabiki was, honestly, getting tired of it. All this for hair.

“I’m going to go talk some sense into her,” Nabiki grumbled.

“She’ll come down when she’s ready,” Kasumi replied softly.

Kousaku and Soun watched silently, sticking to eating their breakfasts as they worried an argument could break out.

“And she’ll be even more behind school. And even more stressed out. Which will lead to more
yelling and breaking things,” Nabiki countered, standing up and marching off. She wasn’t going to be talked out of this.

It didn’t take long to reach Akane’s door. Knocking was an option, but it wouldn’t help. Bracing for something to be chucked at her head, Nabiki opened the door.

Amazingly, there were no projectiles thrown at her head. Akane was lying on her bed, staring at the ceiling. Something in Nabiki told her to close the door behind her before she walked across the room and sat down on the foot of the bed.

“Alright, jockette, how long is this moping session going to last?”

“I’m not moping. I’m thinking,” Akane replied, not bothering to sit up.

“Careful. That’s generally my job in this family.”

The youngest Tendo sat up and glared at her sister. “Just so you know, it isn’t just the hair.”

“I hoped it wasn’t,” Nabiki replied. “But you are seriously stubborn, so I wasn’t totally sure.”

“Gee, thanks.”

Nabiki shrugged as Akane glared at her. “So, what’s it really about?”

“Three years of trying to prove I’m actually a young woman down the drain. Though, in hindsight, the fact that all I really succeeded at was growing my hair kind of says volumes, doesn’t it? The cooking lessons were a failure. Sewing efforts are better left unmentioned. I’m such a hypocrite,” Akane said, wrapping her arms around her legs and staring over at the wall.

“Okay, ignoring your hyper domestic and conservative view of womanhood, I’m not following where the hypocrisy factors in?”

“Ran... er, Ranma. I got so defensive and upset because I had bonded so close to him. I thought I’d
found another girl who was just as much of a hopeless tomboy as me. Who was just worried she was messing up and going to be declared unfit for womanhood. And then it turns out she’s a guy... but Hibari was right. My condition isn’t *that* different. I was practically a boy as a kid.”

Nabiki tried her best not to laugh. Akane was just so over the top about things sometimes. “Well, I’ll admit that I did wonder as a kid if you were trying to convince dad you could be the ‘male heir’ aunt Ikumi said it was a shame he lacked... but, seriously, you’re way too high strung about this stuff. A haircut can’t rob you of your womanhood. And have you ever seen me cook more than instant noodles?”

“How... I think Kasumi made you help with the last New Years dinner?”

“I was drafted against my will, and she didn’t give me anything more than veggie chopping duty,” Nabiki protested. “Anyhow, what about sewing?”

“Um... no. Never seen you sew.”

“What other stereotypes do you need to be reminded don’t matter? I think I can be here a while. Kuno has a presentation in history class, and that’s probably going to be an all day event.”

Akane couldn’t help giggle. “I bet he has a costume.”

“Definitely. And there’ll be a twenty minute rant about the history of the katana, whatever the topic is. You should have seen the teacher when he had to give a presentation on Algeria and somehow spent fifteen minutes on Akechi Mitsuhide.”

Akane laughed enough she ended up snorting. “I needed that. Thanks. Still... I might have been chasing stereotypes, but that doesn’t change the fact I’m far from feminine. And my confusion about how I treated Ranma.”

“What do you say we let Kasumi clean your hair up a little and then we go off to Wakaba and find your friends. Or do you want to keep that style? Messy cuts are ‘punk’, right?”

“This is just a disaster, I want it cut,” Akane replied, getting to her feet. “Also a proper meal. I’ve been running on energy bars and leftovers from the fridge at three AM for too long. Got some serious gut rot going on.”
Nabiki followed her sister downstairs feeling accomplished. Helping someone else out for a change actually was kind of nice. Maybe those trust building exercises the Oozoras insisted she took as part of orientation had been useful. Even if she’d found them infuriating.

The next hour or so went smoothly. Kousaku went to school. Soun asked why Nabiki wasn’t going and just found himself getting glared at. Akane ate quite a bit, while Kasumi hemmed and hawed over her hair.

“There’s no way around it. The front top is so short, you have two choices,” Kasumi said at last, having run through several magazines to try to find alternatives. “Either a mullet or a pixie cut.”

“Pixie cut. I’ll go all in,” Akane said calmly.

Kasumi nodded and the three went to the furo for the easy to clean floors, Akane carrying a chair in with her. As Kasumi cut, Nabiki prodded Akane into discussing her fears with failing to meet femininity. Nabiki was a bit disappointed by her older sister’s simplistic positions, saying that you were what you were born. Only when reminded about Ranma by Nabiki did she relent that maybe there was some thought to be given.

“I suppose, if it isn’t just what you’re born, like may be the case for Ran, then... hm, well, it depends if the decision is external or internal. It could be internal, like religion? Most of us take bits of Shintoism and bits of Buddhism, and maybe a few snippets of Christianity. But you don’t have to take a test so society can tell you which you are. You get to say which you are,” Kasumi said, pausing from the haircut as she confronted an issue she never realised could be an issue. “If it’s external... hmm, I don’t like that idea... oh, but if it is like religion, could you say you just don’t care? That seems so unusual. Hm...”

“Maybe we can postpone breaking Kasumi’s worldview until she’s done with cutting my hair, okay Nabiki?” Akane said, worried about what a distracted hairdresser could mean.

Nabiki shrugged, “Fine, fine. I just find it all interesting. Mostly because I never thought about it until Ranma showed up, and now I found out that little miss ‘act, don’t think’ had actually be working on the concept for years. I’ve got catching up to do.”

“I think about plenty of stuff,” Akane muttered. “My average in year 8 was better than yours was.”
Nabiki rolled her eyes. But she couldn’t help wondering about it all. What if her younger sibling wasn’t a sister? She’d spent a lot of time thinking after that conversation with Hibari. She was pretty that she was a girl through and through, but if Akane had doubts... or was this just like when she was little and started being convinced everyone had the same issue as her mother when they showed the tiniest hint of a symptom?

* * *

Akane felt lighter as she and Nabiki got off the train at Oizumi station, and it wasn’t just due to having less hair. Her identity crisis was (mostly) averted. She was still unsure about quite a lot of things, but Nabiki had helped her to at least feel like she was facing decisions, rather than having to atone for failure.

Of course, heading towards a Yakuza home made her feel a little nervous.

“How far of a walk is it now?” Akane asked.

“I’d say it's about a twenty minutes,” Nabiki replied. “Or we can wait for a bus, but we managed to just miss it if the schedule over here’s to be trusted.”

“Let’s walk,” Akane said.

Nabiki nodded and led the way, heading away from the busy commercial streets around the train station and into quiet suburban lanes that felt much the same as their own neighbourhood. They made it a fair distance before Akane had to speak up what was bothering her.

“It’s not too intense, is it? With all those thugs around and such...”

Nabiki let out an honest laugh. “Not at all. Genma and Ibari try to be intimidating, but their mostly harmless goofballs. Besides, we’ll probably be hanging out with Tsugumi until Ranma and Hibari get home from class.”

“Thank goodness,” Akane replied.
The pair picked up their pace again, making it a few blocks before a guy their age rounded a corner directly in their way. He had spiky hair, silk clothing, and eyes filled with hatred.

“You’re the Tendo girls, yes?” he asked, his speech having a soft Chinese accent.

“Who wants to know?” Nabiki asked, while Akane slid in front of her, getting ready to slide into a combat stance.

“The nemesis of your martial arts ‘school’,” the young man replied. “If one of you would be so kind as to volunteer to be my hostage you’ll find yourself much less injured.”

Akane shifted into a fighting stance, fists raised. “I don’t know what you’re problem is, buddy, but I’m ready to give you a fight, if that’s what you want.”

“You think you can take me? I’m insulted, short girl,” the vile lad replied.

With that he lunged, crossing the space between them and throwing his fist fast enough Akane barely had time to block. Nabiki backed off to safety while Akane tried a counter attack. Their assailant blocked her blows, though there was a little surprise on his face, having obviously expected much less from her.

“Well what do you know, you’re actually almost a warm up,” the guy replied while pulling out a long bit of tan coloured silk. “But I’m bored of you.”

Suddenly he lashed out, managing to use the silk like a whip. As it wrapped around Akane’s forearm she was momentarily distracted by the realization of just what it was.

“Pantyhose?” she muttered, flabbergasted.

Then her opponent yanked and she was thrown off her footing. Before she could recover more of the silk stockings were wrapped around her legs. Then her foe delivered a blow to the back of her head that left her unconscious.
Terror of Taro

Nabiki groaned as she regained consciousness. It took a moment for her to recover her barings and realise she was currently tied to a streetlight by what seemed to be silk pantyhose. Looking down she saw she was a good two to two and a half metres off the ground.

“Great, even if I figure out how to get out of this that fall is going to hurt,” she muttered.

She had to work something out quickly though. Akane was in trouble and time was everything with kidnappings. She also wanted to know why she hadn’t been taken along with her sister. Surely two girls were worth a higher ransom than just one?

* * *

The boys’ gym class was being sent to run laps around the school ground once again. This time, however, Ranma was surprised to see Ukyo keeping up with him and Shui.

“Figured out a new breathin’ technique or something, Ucchan?” Ranma asked as they jogged a good 50m ahead of the next fastest runners.

“No, no. I hadn’t had a chance to mention it since we’ve not had a chance to chat without evesdroppers, but I’ve used some Jusenkyo powder yesterday, and got Shampoo to Cat’s Tongue me until I’ve regained your trust, Ranchan. Since it worked for her, we figured it’s worth a try,” the chef replied.

Ranma gave a nervous glance to Shui, who gave a curt nod of confirmation.

“It is honestly nice to be able to breathe easier like this,” Ukyo continued.

“I haven’t tried wrapping like you, but I can say I that joggin’ is certainly less of hassle in guy form,” Ranma replied. “Sports bras only do so much.”

“One good thing about this curse,” Shui added as the trio rounded a corner of the school.

That was where they stumbled to a stop as a sprinting Hibari slammed into Shui, causing a domino effect that ended with a pile of teens.

“Ow,” Ranma grumbled from the bottom of the pile up. “What the heck’s goin’ on?”

“Emergency phone call from home,” Hibari replied, having somehow wiggled herself to have her lips in position to quickly kiss Ranma on the cheek. “Nabiki showed up, and apparently some weirdo kidnapped Akane. Wants us to stage a rescue.”

“A rescue? After she said those mean things to tongzhi?” Shui asked.

“Nabiki says she was on her way to apologise, had some sort of revelation about life and gender and things. Tsugumi thinks she might be in a little bit of shock, not used to getting beaten up,” Hibari explained.

“Can we untangle ourselves before continuing this conversation?” Ukyo asked, trying to wiggle out.

“Oh, yeah,” Hibari mumbled, before yelping. “Oy, Spatula, watch the elbows. That was my boob.”

“Sorry, sorry,” Ukyo stammered while managing to slip free.
Ranma found himself being pulled up by Shui and Hibari, and blushed a bit when both found an opportunity to get a bit handsy in doing so.

“C-can we go focus on the rescue?” a thoroughly flustered Ranma asked.

“Right, yep,” Hibari replied innocently.

* * *

Suzume and her friends hurrieded out the front gate of their school. They all wanted to get home quickly to watch their favourite after-school cartoons before having to focus on homework.

That focus fizzled however when a massive shadow passed over the trio of young girls. The three young girls looked up, curious to see if it was a plane, or maybe a blimp.

Instead they were greeted by the sight of what seemed to be a flying gorilla. The mysterious beast turned around and began heading in their directions, swooping down towards the ground.

As it landed heavily Suzume’s friends screamed and fled. The youngest Oozora however stood rooted to the spot, her gut filled with a mixture of wonder and dread.

She could see now that the creature had the head of a cow, and cows were friendly creatures, weren’t they? She hoped that would mean this thing was friendly too, because her curiosity had left her in place too long to run now.

The giant beast loomed over her, and she saw its eyes did not look kind. A hand reached out and grabbed her by the shirt, lifting her a couple metres from the ground, resulting in a panicked shriek from the 9 year old Oozora.

Tears began to run down the young girl’s face as she found her life potential in danger. “P-please, gorilla-bull-san, d-don’t hurt me.”

The creature huffed before it’s massive wings unfurled and the pair were airborne faster than Suzume would have thought possible if any rational part of her brain were still working.

* * *

A bruised and battered Nabiki was surrounded as Ranma, Ukyo, Hibari, and Shui tried to get any clues they could out of her to figure out who this unknown kidnapper might be.


Nabiki gave the cursed girl a slight glare from under the ice pack she held to her forehead. “I’m not a linguist, okay? I just know he sounded Chinese.”

“Fair... accent is probably as affected by who he learned Japanese from as it is which dialect he started with,” Shui admitted.

“What style did he seem like he was using?” Ranma asked.

“I’m not really all that great at identifying that stuff. I... wait, no, he seemed to go for long strikes. I think that’s more northern China, right?”

Shui and Ranma nodded.
“Generally,” Shui replied.

“Couldn’t tell you who it is,” Genma said as he walked into the room. The man’s face was serious and his tone fatherly. “I was on the phone with your father, Nabiki. Neither of us are sure who would identify themself as our school’s nemesis. Oozora said he’d send his men out to comb for witnesses.”

Before anyone could say anything more the sound of the telephone ringing reached the room. Everyone dashed towards the phone, however Tsugumi had been nearest and picked it up. The others wondered who was phoning now when suddenly the eldest Oozora girl’s face turned pale. The normally calm girl seemed on the edge of shock as she hung up the phone.

“S-Suzume... sh-she was taken by some sort of flying creature,” Tsugumi muttered, staring out the window. “A half dozen children walking the same directions as her and a few residents of the area all reported roughly the same thing.”

All eyes turned to Shui.

“Is there a cursed spring for that?” Ukyo asked.

“Maybe,” Shui replied. “I need to go back to the restaurant. Great grandmother would know.”

“I’ll go get Soun and Kasumi,” Genma said. “It would be safer for them to be here with Oozora’s men if there’s some sort of monster on the prowl.”

“I think it’d be best if nobody’s travellin’ alone. From what Nabiki’s said, this guy’s a serious threat in human form. Don’t even wanna know what he can do in beast form,” Ranma said. “Ukyo, you wanna go with Shampoo while Hibari and I go with pops?”

The chef looked ready to argue for a moment, but sighed and nodded. “Alright, sure thing Ran-chan.”

* * *

The Japanese part timers were proving better than Cologne had expected. It only took two of them to equal Shampoo’s serving abilities. Still, her great grandchild was a bit late for her return from school, and the dinner rush was likely to start up soon. The sound of the back door opening brought a smile to the old woman’s face, the child was right on cue. The footsteps were heavier, which meant the teen was in cursed form.

“I think it will be a waiter night then, child,” Cologne said while focusing on dicing a potato.

«Great grandmother, we have an emergency,» Shui announced, her Mandarin rapid and worried. Ukyo followed right behind her, watching their rear.

Realising Shui was panicking, Cologne did not chide her for slackin on Japanese practice. «What is wrong, child?»

«The youngest Tendo and Oozora girls were both kidnapped by someone who said they were a nemesis of the school of my fiancées. The kidnapper may have a Jusenkyo curse. There was a human kidnapper and a giant winged beast, which seem likely to be the same person?» Shui explained rapidly, pacing a bit.

«Hm, it could be the spring of the drowned yeti-riding-a-water-buffalo-carrying-a-crane-and-an-eel...» Cologne replied after a moment’s contemplation.
Shui blinked, which didn’t surprise Cologne. That spring’s name was such a mouthful. She’d only remembered the name because it was so bizarre.

«The Jusenkyo visitor’s records were also stolen recently... it would make sense that someone tied to the springs is up to a plot of some sort.»

“What are you all chatting about?” Mousse asked as he wandered into the kitchen, a few dirty plates in hand.

Ukyo gave him a confused shrug.

«Important things, not idle masculine gossip like you no doubt hope,» Shui grumbled.

“And yet you’re participating,” Mousse replied with a smirk as he glanced down to Shui’s body.

Shui grew flush while glaring at the short haired waiter. «Even in this form I’m a woman, you idiot.»

“One moment, part-timer,” Cologne said, switching to Japanese as she realised how confused Ukyo was looking. “I remember you crawled in here with a smile and a black eye a few nights ago. You wouldn’t happen to have met a winged beast of a man looking for vengeance on the martial arts school of my future in laws would you?”

“I... no. Definitely not. Do you really think I have so little dignity as to aid someone who beat me up simply because I share a common enemy with them?” Mousse declared.

“You have not had an ounce of dignity since we were seven years old and you ate that toad,” Shui replied flatly. “Tell me who we’re dealing with. Now.”

“Why should I?” Mousse fumed. “He’s Saotome and Oozora’s problem, not yours.”

“He has kidnapped two people. Including a child,” Ukyo shot back.

“W-wait... what? He didn’t say anything about planning to kidnap anyone! He just said he was after the creepy little slime who taught Saotome’s dad,” Mousse stammered. “I... I don’t actually know what he’s after, or where he went though. But I refuse to be the accessory to a kidnapping. Let me help out.”

Shui glared at the bespectacled teen for a moment. “...Fine. Make up for your idiocy.”

* * *

As the door opened Akane struggled with her restraints that held her to a wooden pillar in this old building (the restraints, being that they were silk stockings, were surprisingly strong). She wanted to teach this creep a lesson. The pantyhose held however, which may have been a good thing as a terrifying winged best lumbered in, carrying a terrified young girl in its arms. In the low light it took Akane a moment to recognize the little blue haired girl.

The beast grunted and tossed Suzume in Akane’s direction, the young girl landing in a sprawled position a metre or so from the other hostage.

“What the heck are you?” Akane shouted at it. “That’s no way to treat a child!”

The beast snorted, turned away, and left the room (closing the door behind it). All Akane could do was glare at the door for a moment before turning to the younger girl.

“Are you okay? I hope you’re not hurt too bad?” Akane asked in her best attempt at a calm and
reassuring tone.

“I-I scraped my knee and hand when I fell,” Suzume replied, trying to keep calm. “I th-think I’m all out of my tears for the day, but I still want to cry.”

Akane nodded. “I hate to have to ask this, but are you any good with knots? If you can untie me I can try to take a better look at your scrapes.”

“Y-yep. I’ll see if I can figure it out,” the young girl said, wincing only a little as she pulled herself to her feet.

“If you can feel a bit of pain then that’s a good sign,” Akane said as the girl came her way. “It means you’re almost certainly not in shock. Which keeps things easier.”

“Tsugumi told me all about shock,” Suzume said as she walked around and began fussing with the knots. “Since daddy has a bad heart, and sometimes the men who work for daddy get hurt, Tsugumi is really good with first aid and other things. Sabu and Seiji are both really good too. And... oh, that was the wrong way. Um... This is a fancy knot. How did that big creature tie it?”

“It was a guy who captured me. I don’t know if he’s, like, a werewolf or something, but his eyes were just like that beast’s. Pure evil,” Akane replied.

“Maybe he has a curse,” Suzume offered. “Like uncle Genma, turning into a big creature.”

“Wait, uncle Genma does what?” Akane asked.

*I * *

Ibari sat in the room he generally considered his ‘war room’ in moments of crisis as Sabu and Seiji manned the phone lines, getting information from the men sent out to hunt for clues. While the guy who kidnapped Akane was subtle enough to leave few witnesses the giant winged beast (that all were sure was connected, if not the same person... the Saotomes had really turned his sense of normal upside down) left many witnesses all across the ward. Reports were even coming in from elsewhere in Tokyo, though some where wildly contradictory in timing vs location.

A frustrated Ibari took a sip of saké as he tried to map out the reports, hoping there’d be a trend of some sort. It seemed like maybe the creature was set up somewhere in the more mountainous western parts of Tokyo, but it wasn’t a clear enough majority of the sightings for Ibari to feel confident.

“It’s a kidnapping, then they’ll surely make their demands known at some point,” Nabiki muttered (mostly to herself) as she sat in a corner.

“I hope so,” Ibari replied, taking another swig of saké.

It was then that the doorbell rang. Ibari and a small army of yakuza thugs swarmed to the door. The men were armed with a wide array of weapons, almost all highly illegal. As they got into place behind the door a junior thug nervously slid the door open.

“Oh, quite the greeting,” the evil eyed teen outside said.

“Are you one of the kidnappers?” Ibari seethed.

“The only one,” the boy replied.

“Get him!” Ibari shouted, as the thugs and martial artists swarmed forward to tackle the lad.
The teen made no effort to struggle and let himself be tied up and dragged out to the dojo. Nabiki was called in to confirm his identity, which she did before leaving to lie down again.

“I doubt he’d be dumb enough to get captured if he’s really working alone,” Ibari said, now that the boy’s identity was confirmed. “Men, get out and guard the compound. Who knows what friends he might have.”

The thugs saluted and rushed off in their various directions. Ibari remained in the dojo with Seiji and Sabu.

“Alright, pal. What are you after?” Ibari hissed.

“That’s easy. I want the founder of Anything Goes style. Alive, though sedated might make my life easier,” the teen replied.

“The little pervert?” Ibari asked, disdain no doubt evident in his voice. He hated that little slime and the idea of any of his children having to be in the same city as the creep.

“I have a bone to pick with him. And very little patience for anyone who respects him.”

“I hate the man, but I have no idea where he is. He beat up too many of the men I had keeping an eye on him, and now he’s left town. I’d be happy to help you find him... once you return my daughter, as well as Tendo’s girl,” Ibari replied flatly.

The prisoner gave Ibari a lidded stare. “I’m not handing over the hostages until you give him up.”

“Then we’ll do this the hard way... well, hard for you,” Ibari said, a slightly evil smile. He didn’t usually go for the darker side of things, but this was for Suzume. “Seiji, go get Kim and Shinoda. Tell them to bring the special equipment.”

“Woah, hey. There’s no need for torture. I’ll cooperate a bit if you could just bring me something to drink. I’m rather parched,” the boy replied, perhaps just a touch too amicably.

Ibari blinked. He hadn’t expected such a quick change of tune off the kid. “Sure, alright. Change of plans, Seiji. Tell Tsugumi to bring some juice for our guest.”

* * *

Soun had been an emotional wreck when they made it to the Tendo home. Genma had dug out something from Soun’s bedroom that Ranma couldn’t quite identify, but certainly smelled stronger than saké, and had the Tendo father drink it. Whatever it was had left the man coughing, but determined.

What Ranma didn’t like, however, was the looks Soun began giving him. While Nabiki had claimed Akane was planning an apology it seemed Soun wasn’t quite in the same forgiving headspace. It had been starting to take all the pigtailed boy had not to snap at the mustachioed dojo owner when Ranma felt Hibari take his hand.

“We’ll deal with him later,” she whispered into Ranma’s ear. “Saving Akane will hopefully do the convincing for us.”

Ranma nodded, before pulling Hibari closer into a hug as they walked. “Thanks for worryin’ about me, but I don’t want ya ta feel like ya have to watch me while also worryin’ about Suzume.”

“She’s a tough little firecracker. And she’s got Akane to help protect her. Even if that girl’s a bit
confused, I think she’d keep Suzume safe. We know... we know she can fight, at least,” Hibari replied, fear creeping into her normally unflappable tone.

“We’ll find a lead soon, I’m sure of it,” Ranma said, leaning down and kissing the red haired girl on the forehead.

Hibari smiled softly and the pair continued their walk in silence, sticking a bit behind the other three. Ranma could feel that she was holding him in a way that showed more a craving for reassurance than her usual energetic grasp. What he didn’t realise was the way his own grasp was just as desperate. He’d come to care for Suzume more than he’d realised. The Oozora girls were going to officially be family in the relatively near future, and Suzume was already practically his own little sister in his heart by now.

The five of them caught a bus for the bulk of the trip to the Oozora home, and apparently the gentle rumbling of the bus was enough to put the inebriated Soun to sleep. Hibari and Kasumi both did their best not to giggle as the Tendo father slumped over onto Genma, but their bests were worn down by the stress of the day and ended in a pair of giggle fits.

Genma being unable to wake Soun, who kept snoring away, and Genma having to carry the man led to more distraction for the worry filling everyone’s hearts. Ranma was glad to have a bit of comedy to take his mind of it as they made it the short distance from the bus stop to the Oozora compound.

“Hey, we’ve got good news,” a thug watching the door said as the group approached. “One of the kidnappers showed up, we’ve got him out in the dojo.”

“Really? He just walked up?” Hibari asked as they crossed the threshold into the compound.

“Yeah, was like he wanted ta get captured or sometin’,” the thug replied. “Getting interrogated right no—”

The thug’s sentence was cut off by the sound of a roof shattering. Realising it was almost certainly the dojo, Ranma, Hibari, and Genma (who let Soun slump into Kasumi’s arms) rushed across the compound. They made it just in time to watch as a winged beast took off into the sky, heading to the south.

A few thugs not completely stunned by the appearance of this furry winged demon had begun opening fire, but there was no sign that any hit it.

“Somebody follow him!” Hibari shouted at the men. “Get the cars, or a bike, or something! See where he’s going!”

Ranma, on the other hand, chose to rush in towards the dojo, to make sure everyone was alright. He found Sabu slumped against a wall, looking battered and with a (probably) broken leg, but still conscious and mumbling in pain. Seiji was in the middle of the room, a number of timbers from the roof liking on his back as he shielded Ibari under himself. The Yakuza boss was unconscious, and Ranma couldn’t tell how hurt he was due to Seiji’s position.

“Pops! I’m going to need some help!” Ranma shouted towards the door.

His father appeared a moment later and the pair worked to remove the planks from Seiji. It also took a bit of effort to pull the gorilla of a man off from Ibari, checking both for major injuries.

Tsugumi, Kasumi, and a few of the men with better first aid knowledge soon joined them. Hibari was close behind, though keeping a bit of distance due to first aid not being her specialty.
“I think we’ll need a proper doctor,” Tsugumi said as she examined her father’s arm. “Broken bones are a bit above my specialty, and I think Seiji has some cracked ribs.”

“Alright, I’ll give both the doctors we know a call,” Hibari replied. “I hope we find out where this jerk is hiding soon. I want to give him a piece of my mind.”
Flight of the Bull

Chapter Notes

Taro’s a jerk. Unpleasant language ensues.

The mysterious attacker’s base had been found: a large abandoned house on a cliff near the ocean. While Ranma worried it was too easy, there were hostages to be saved so it didn’t matter if it was a trap or not.

At least they could use (rather crowded) the car ride down towards Sagami Bay to discuss tactics.

“We should probably split into two groups,” Ranma said, still trying to get comfortable as one of four people in a space meant to sit three.

“Mousse is good at distractions,” Shui replied, poking the bespectacled boy up front in the back on the head.

“Yeah, I believe that. And I figure, since it’s Suzume bein’ held prisoner that Hibari definitely goes on the rescue team,” Ranma continued.

“They might be locked up in a cell or something,” Hibari replied, her tone serious as she sat between Shui and the window. “I could use some muscle.”

“Shampoo then?” Ukyo offered. “I think she’s the strongest of the five of us.”

“Makes sense. So you two run sneak around the side while Ukyo, Mousse, and I go for a frontal attack? And, Seiji, you gonna stay by the car?” Ranma asked.

The large yakuza thug nodded. “Getaway driver suits me fine. We’ll be coming up on the destination in just a minute or two.”

Ranma shifted to a determined grin as he waited. He was going to beat the pulp out of this kidnapping jerk.

Seiji pulled the car to a stop and the two groups slipped off on separate paths along the steep seaside. The more worn direct path didn’t take long.

“Well, let’s let him know we’re here,” Ranma said, crossing his arms confidently.

Mousse nodded and produced a megaphone. “Hey, cow face! We’d like to talk to you. With our fists!”

Ukyo and Ranma both felt their eyes twitch. That was the last time either of them let Mousse be in charge of smack talking. It seemed to work though, as the front door of the home slammed open a few moments later and revealed an aggressive looking teen with rather large hair.

“Heh, so you finally showed up,” the kidnapper bellowed, stepping out towards them.

“Of course we did,” Ranma shouted back. “Now, before we wipe the floor with ya, I just want ta tell
ya one thing: if you’d gone about this like a reasonable human bein’ we’d a helped you capture the creepy old slimeball you hate so much. But, since ya went down the kidnappin’ route, you’ve made yourself some enemies.”

“Nice speech. But I don’t see Happosai in chains, so you’re not getting the prisoners!”

“Let’s just see about that!” Ukyo shouted, tossing a volley of throwing spatulas.

The mysterious foe dodged the volley well enough, though he was forced to dodge again from a hail of miscellaneous objects thrown by Mousse. It didn’t seem to phase him though.

“Scared to get any closer?” their foe bellowed as he avoided the long ranged projectiles with ease.

“Not at all, pal!” Ranma roared back, launching himself towards the enemy.

The foe dodged the first swing, though it had been a rather easy to see assault so Ranma was far from impressed. The next swing he had to block, however he dodged Ranma’s third blow at the last moment and the pigtailed teen’s hand broke through surprisingly thin stone. A split second later Ranma was drenched in cold water flowing out from the hill and several centimetres shorter.

The kidnapper glared at Ranma. “So it’s you. The little girly boy.”

“What’s that supposed ta mean pal?” Ranma demanded.

“Oh, nothing. Just think I’m going to enjoy beating up a little deviant tr@**y like you,” the lad replied, with an evil grin growing across his face.

Several metres up, hidden amongst the rocks, Hibari froze and looked down at the main battle area.

“That creep didn’t just say what I thought he said, did he?” she asked, watching as Ranma unleashed a flurry of amaguriken blows.

“I think he did!” Shui replied.

Hibari’s eye twitched. “I’m going back to the car. I’ve got a present that I’m certain he deserves now.”

“What about Suzume?” Shui asked, glancing down nervously as Ranma shouted something (the small teen was partially wrapped up in... ropes perhaps?).

“She’d support me, I’m certain,” Hibari replied, already heading back.

Shui shrugged. She didn’t quite understand what was going on, but she’d stay on mission.

Back down the hill, Ukyo had engaged the kidnapper while Mousse tried to help untangle Ranma from the pantyhose. Unfortunately the Okonomiyaki chef was struggling, not being a master of close combat. A well placed roundhouse kick from their foe sent Ukyo stumbling back a bit, before stumbling over the cliffs edge.

“Ukyo!” Ranma shouted, as she launched herself across the distance between them and grabbed the chef’s hand to keep Ukyo from falling.

“Thank you,” Ukyo replied, looking up at Ranma with a smile while dangling over the water and rocks below. “Um, are you going to help pull me up?”

The short redhead gave a strained grin. “I ain’t quite untied, so I’ve only got the one arm free right
now."

"Ah, that’s fair,” Ukyo replied.

Not far away from the struggling duo, Mousse was striking furiously at the stranger.

"I refuse to be an accessory to kidnapping!” the bespectacled teen roared, just barely missing his enemy.

"Siding with freaks is better somehow?”

Mousse’s face scrunched up in rage. “Y-yes! At least they have some shreds of honour!”

Enraged, Mousse produced a sledgehammer and swung it at his foe. The other teen managed to just barely dodge, before both were drenched in a spray of water.

The small black cat stared up at the monstrous bull creature for a moment, before giving a meow that was definitely filling in for a profanity.

* * *

"Ow!” Akane groaned, after bouncing off the steel door for a third time.

She could hear that there was fighting outside, and wasn’t going to sit passively by and wait for a rescue effort.

"Maybe we can try something else?” Suzume offered. “I think the ceiling is made of wood?”

Akane sighed. “It is, but there’s nothing to prop myself against up there. Plus, we don’t know what’s upstairs. There could be a vault or furniture. Not things we want landing on us.”

Suzume nodded, and Akane tried the door again. This time she felt it buckle slightly. She was making progress, but she wasn’t quite sure if her shoulder or the door would give first.

“Well, I’ve got two shoulders,” the young Tendo muttered to herself with a feeling of grim determination.

It was at that point that one of the walls caved in with a cloud of dust. Akane rushed to get between Suzume and whatever had just broken through... only to find herself staring at an utterly gorgeous young man with a soft smile. Well, a soft smile and a large chui in one hand.

"Hello, I’m the rescue party,” the handsome black haired teen replied.

Akane felt her cheeks going hot as more dust settled and she got a better look at this new arrival. “Th-thank you!”

“Shui-chan!” Suzume shouted, rushing forward and embracing their rescuer.

“Suzume! Are you okay? Those look like some nasty scrapes,” Shui replied, kneeling next to the young girl.

“It’s just some cuts. Akane said I was okay,” Suzume replied confidently.

“Well, we should still get you washed up,” Shui replied, with a hand on the young girl’s shoulder. “I can tell you’ve been very brave though, good work.”
Thoughts of being held hostage were all but gone from Akane’s mind as she watched the handsome Shui comfort Suzume. Akane always was a sucker for long haired guys with a gentle side...

* * *

Ranma wheezed. Direct blows from that bull beast was not something she could take much more of... but Ukyo was down with a dislocated shoulder and Mousse was quickly boiling up a kettle to be of use to the fight again.

The worst part was probably the inhuman laughter of the beast though.

“I bet ya hate that you can’t gloat right now,” Ranma muttered, wiping a bit of blood from her forehead.

The beast shrugged indifferently, much to Ranma’s annoyance. The shrug was followed by a series of punches, missing the quick footed redhead as she scrambled desperately.

Managing to get a little breathing room, Ranma picked up a large stone to chuck at the creature. At least the beast couldn’t dodge as well as when he was human, though nothing Ranma hit him with seemed to do much. A few more rocks for good measure did no apparently damage, but they made the small girl feel a bit better at least.

“Come on and turn back into a human, you pantyhose obsessed weirdo! I want some bant—gyah!” Ranma began, however something she said had sent her foe into a wild rage and he’d charged her before she could finish.

Rolling out of the way, Ranma couldn’t help wonder just what it was that ticked him off. There were only so many options though.

“Human?” Ranma tried first, however the beast remained unphased and took a fighting stance.

“Obsessed? Pantyho—!”

That was it. The enraged roar and easy to read strike... this stranger had a weak point.

“Haha! Now I know how to annoy ya, you pantyhose loser!” Ranma laughed.

The furious beast lashed out once more, however this time had been an open handed strike and Ranma’s dodge left her ankle in grabbing range. Lifted off the ground by the massive beast, Ranma could only respond by kicking him in the knuckles.

“Let go a’ me, ya big lug!” the small redhead protested.

Instead she found herself pulled up to his face, dangling upside down while the beast laughed with his inhuman laugh once more. He was planning something vile. So she punched him square in the nose.

The beast stumbled back a bit, groaning, when a volley of spatulas hit him in the face, causing him to drop Ranma.

“Ucchan, good to see yer feelin’ better,” Ranma said as she landed beside the chef.

“I got my shoulder back in place, but I’m not sure I can manage much close combat,” Ukyo replied. “What’s the plan?”

“I was thinking of trying to hit him with a bigger rock?” Ranma offered.
She was not thrilled to see Ukyo looking rather less than impressed by the idea. But what else was there to do? Her punches and kicks weren’t going to take him down before she got worn out herself.

“Yo! Eel-butt!” Hibari’s voice called out.

Ranma, Ukyo, and the beast turned to the other red haired girl. She had set herself up on a nearby ridge with something large in her arms.

“Is that a bazooka?” Ukyo asked.

The rocket that shot out and quickly slammed into the beast with an impressive fireball answered the chef’s question effectively enough.

Their opponent knocked over in a cloud of smoke, Ranma and Ukyo both let out a sigh of relief. A moment later Ranma found herself lightly tackled by a hug from Hibari. Ranma couldn’t help having an ‘ow’ escape her.

“Are you okay?” the taller redhead asked.

“I’m in one piece. That ain’t bad considerin’ the size of the other guy,” Ranma replied.

“Thank goodness,” Hibari said, giving Ranma a quick peck on the cheek.

“Where’s the prisoners?” Ukyo asked.

“Oh, uh... Shampoo’s dealing with that,” Hibari replied with an awkward smile. “I just heard the slurs that guy was tossing around and knew I had to hit him with the rocket launcher. Wanted a chance to use that thing ever since daddy bought it.”

Ranma couldn’t help giggling. “Of course you would pull out a rocket launcher over that... we should probably check that he’s still breathing though. That looked like it hurt.”

“I mean, I guess?” Hibari replied, not quite as invested in the health of their opponent.

Cautiously, the three teens approached the still smoking form of the bovine monster they’d been fighting. Most of the fur on his chest had burned off, but the amount of blood seemed minimal. He was also breathing, but seemed far from conscious.

“Oh, he’s down is he?” Mousse said, catching up to the others once more human, a kettle in hand.

“Looks like it... is there still water in that?” Hibari asked.

“A little,” Mousse replied, handing it over.

“Well, let’s make him a bit more manageable, shall we?” Hibari said, walking over to pour some hot water on the beasts head.

Just as she leaned over, the beast’s eyes shot open. Distracted by surprise for a moment, Hibari soon found herself lifted in the air by a massive hand around her torso. Squirming angrily, Hibari just went higher as the bovine being got to his feet.

“Let her go!” Ranma shouted from somewhere below.

Ranma watched in confusion as the beast seemed about to put Hibari down... only to suddenly whip his arm and send the girl careening through the air and then through the outer wall of the nearby building with a terrifying crunch.
“Hibariiii!” Ranma shouted as her fiancee vanished through the masonry.

Feeling her heart drop from her chest, Ranma dashed across the distance between her and the building, barely touching the ground as she moved. To her surprise, she found Shui, Suzume, and Akane beside the unconscious blonde. The kettle was beside her, and her damp shirt explained the change in hair colour.

“She’s breathing,” Akane said, crouched down beside Hibari. “She might have broken bones though. I’m not sure yet.”

Ranma gave a curt nod. “I’ll clear us a path out of here.”

With that the short redhead launched herself back towards the fight, where Mousse was being waved around at the end of one of his spiked chains, and was being swung at Ukyo.

Ranma slipped inside Mousse’s swing arc, and launched up from a handstand to kick the beast in the wrist. Mousse was sent flying up into the air, while the beast groaned in rage.

“Mousse!” Ranma shouted up to the airborne teen, “I’m going to need you help!”

“Oh? It’s good to be appreciated,” Mousse replied, finally reaching the peak of his arc through the air.

As he floated weightless for a split second his glasses drifted up away from his head, and he missed what Ranma was doing to his landing site, only seeing a blur of motion. The question was answered when he found himself landing in a pool of water, annoyed that he’d just regained his humanity mere minutes before.

Still, he got the gist of the plan, and (after pulling himself out of the water that he found himself hating so much in cursed form) moved to pounce the ponytailed teen to help.

“No me you jerk!” Ukyo shouted, throwing the small black cat at Ranma.

The redhead predictably shrieked, leaving the minotaur-like foe confused at how this was a strategy. At least until Mousse produced some of his steel claw extensions, hitting Ranma’s personal fear of cats perfectly and causing the short girl to meow in an inhuman tone.

A moment later she’d thrown herself at the beast’s chest, slashing away with chi claws against already burned flesh. Her foe let out a pained roar as she climbed up his torso to reaching scratching range of his face. He tried to pull her off, but found her scampering onto his back.

That was when she noticed the wings, and bit into them hard.

Ukyo watched in a mixture of fear and amazement as neko Ranma scampered all about her giant foe, seeming to get more feathers in her hair and mouth each time she crossed his back. Eventually the beast of a boy grabbed a hold of her, only to be bitten on the hand for his trouble. Screeching, he was suddenly barraged by more claws to the face, until his stumbled backwards, tripping on some loose rock and knocking himself unconscious as his head hit a boulder.

Well, most of him, his tail remained conscious and squirming, trying to bite at a very amused kitty who seemed convinced this was the best game she’d ever played.

* * *

Akane felt the blonde girl’s torso, trying to identify any broken ribs to assess how easy it would be to
move her. While doing so, however, Akane couldn’t help notice the absence of something... or perhaps two somethings.

“What is wrong?” Shui asked, causing Akane to blush with how close the handsome teen was.

“I, uh... I don’t feel any broken bones, but her chest... it’s, uh, strangely flat? Does... does she have a curse like Ranma?” Akane asked.

“She’s my sister, and that’s what matters,” Suzume protested, crossing her arms to pout.

“S-sorry,” Akane replied, while glancing down at the blonde again. “I... I think we can move her. Just be careful.”

Shui nodded and carefully lifted Hibari to carry her out the front door. The walk to the car was short enough, though Akane was very confused by the cat with glasses in Ukyo’s arms. She even more confused by the way Ranma was moving around like a cat, and actually meowing.

“A-are the young misses alright?” Seiji asked, closing up the trunk as they arrived.

“I think Hibari’s arm is broken? But beyond that there wasn’t anything I could identify,” Akane replied. “Suzume I think just needs to clean off some scrapes.”

Yep! I’m good,” Suzume added, beaming away.

“Good to hear,” Seiji replied, sighing in relief before setting himself up in the driver’s seat.

Ukyo hopped in the front passenger seat, with the black cat in glasses lying down on the chef’s lap. Akane tentatively slid into a window seat, helping to put Hibari in the middle to prop between herself and Shui. Suzume hopped on Akane’s lap, while Ranma scrambled up onto Shui’s lap, before crawling over to sit on Hibari’s and beginning to purr.

Akane was too tired to properly register that by this point however, and may have drifted off at some point.

She was rather surprised when Ranma suddenly woke up halfway through their drive, apparently alert and human.

“I-is Hibari okay?” Ranma asked, scooting over to Shui’s lap.

“Just tired,” the blonde whispered, surprising everyone.

“You’re awake?” Akane asked.

The blonde opened her eyes and gave a strained smile. “I’d rather be asleep with this pain, but it’s not happening.”

“I’d hug ya, but I worry that’d hurt,” Ranma said, lightly running a hand on Hibari’s cheek.

“Thanks,” Hibari replied, laughing a little. “Ow... okay, no laughing.”

Akane smiled weakly at her two friends. “I... I’m sorry I was an idiot before. I kind of panicked... I’ve always worried about whether or not I’m a ‘proper’ girl, so... sorry.”

“Hey... if you need someone to talk to about that... you’ve found the right group,” Hibari replied, despite talking being a bit of a struggle.
“Let the rest of us handle it for now though, alright Hibari?” Ukyo said, using the rear view mirror to make eye contact.

The blonde nodded.

“Wait... the rest of you?” Akane asked, glancing nervously at Shui especially.

Ukyo raised a hand. “Born a girl, swore off my femininity as a kid, never really looked back. Currently under the effects of some Jusenkyo magic.”

“I don’t know how much Nabiki explained,” Ranma then added. “But, yeah, I was born and raised a boy, but with my Jusenkyo curse and Hibari’s support I’ve slowly been growing the courage to embrace both sides of myself.”

“Born a girl, raised a girl, have a reverse curse of Ranma’s, for... complicated reasons,” Shui explained. “Unlike tongzhi Ranma liking the curse, I... I don’t really like being a boy. But I was signed up at school as a boy. And, well, I have a bit better strength and reach in guy mode, so it made sense for a fight. Less flexibility though.”

Akane paled a bit, before whispering: “I got a crush on a boy who’s really a girl...”

“What’s wrong with that?” Suzume asked, causing Akane to blush as she’d forgotten the small bluenette on her lap would hear her.

“I... well, uh... I don’t think I lean that way?” Akane offered.

“We’ll see when she gets a kettle,” Hibari added with a wide grin. “Her and Ranma opened my eyes.”

“We’re very sexy,” Shui replied, with a supportive nod from Ranma.

“I think my life is entering a very strange new chapter,” Akane mumbled. “Should be interesting at least.”

The rest of the car ride was quiet enough, Hibari leaning to whichever side the motion of the car lead her to, obviously even more tired than Akane.

It wasn’t too long until they were reaching a part of Tokyo Akane knew well. As they pulled off the highway the young Tendo swore she heard some banging from the trunk, but was sure it was just boxes moving about.

It was only when they pulled up to the Oozora compound that she discovered it the kidnapper had been back there, tied up, returned to human form and looking rather ferociously beaten... and scratched.

Akane headed for the main door with the others, not sure where the stranger was being taken, and not sure if she wanted to know. Suzume ran ahead, but Akane stayed back in case Ranma and Shui needed help with Hibari. Luckily the two had things well managed and they made it to the entrance in good time. As Akane entered the front door she found herself pulled into a hug by Kasumi, and got a pat on the shoulder from Nabiki.

“I was so worried!” Kasumi said, still holding on.

“I’m fine, I’m fine,” Akane replied, trying to reassure her eldest sister as she backed out of the hug.
Glancing over, she noticed Suzume being hugged by Tsubame and Tsugumi, both of whom were holding onto the young girl quite tightly. It was obvious that they were reluctant to let go.

“She handled herself really well,” Akane said to the older Oozora girls. “I admire her determination.”

“Akane’s really cool. We should have her over more,” Suzume added. “She kept trying to break us out, even though we were in a dungeon. Oh! But Hibari...”

“I’m alive,” the blonde said, limping in while leaning against Shui for support. “I’m not sure what else I can say though.”

“Oh! Oh no! I’ll call for a doctor!” Tsugumi gasped, hurrying off towards the phone.

“What on earth happened to you?” Tsubame asked, genuine compassion in her eyes.

“I got thrown through a building,” the blonde replied. “I don’t recommend trying that.”

* * *

After Kasumi had been safely stowed away up on the second floor, Dr. Tofu had begun to check over the battered crew. Akane wasn’t surprised to learn the Oozoras had switched to him from their regular doctor.

Suzume winced a bit when some of her nastier cuts were disinfected. Akane blushed when Dr. Tofu had checked her over, though she’d proven to be in good shape (apart from bruising on her shoulder from trying to bust through an iron door). Ukyo’s shoulder was given some bandaging, a process that had revealed a well-toned and masculine looking chest that Akane could scarcely believe wasn’t the chef’s usual appearance; it looked so natural with Ukyo’s handsome face. Hibari’s chest on the other hand looked wrong to Akane, but that may have been from her having seen the girl’s other form enough times to feel certain about things. As for Ranma... she continued to look so small and adorable that, even though Akane had seen the transformation, she still couldn’t believe the two forms of Ranma were one person.

“Well, that should be everything,” Tofu said softly. “I’ll go check on the visitor now.”

As Tofu left, Shui hurried in, with a kettle in hand. Akane knew why the cursed girl had the kettle, and blushed at the implication.

“So, let’s see if Shampoo’s your type too,” Shui said, with a mischievous smile. A moment later the teen upended the kettle upon her head, transforming into a very feminine form.

Watching it was very disorienting for Akane. She went from attracted, to confusion, to possible attraction in under 10 seconds. “Well, I... I don’t know? Maybe there’s something... maybe I’m just still seeing your guy side on some level?”

Shampoo sighed. “Well, can’t win them all.”

“Ow... Shampoo, I think I might need a restraining order until my ribs heal,” Hibari said, trying her best not to giggle.

* * *

Ibari sat patiently with Genma and Soun as Dr. Tofu finished up the examination of the prisoner. The teen was conscious, but refusing to speak. The best the doctor could get out of him was the occasional grunt while running through some stitching or applying bandages.
Dr. Tofu sighed as he stood up. “Well, I feel I need to inform you that transforming is out of the question for a week at the very least. Possibly longer. Your stitches wouldn’t handle it at all.”

The boy glared at him.

Shaking his head, Tofu turned to the men in the room. “I really don’t know how I feel about you holding a minor prisoner like this... though I suppose the authorities couldn’t really manage his ‘condition’.”

“I’m not asking you to support it,” Ibari replied. “I’d prefer if you hadn’t had to get involved in this, but I didn’t want to leave him without proper medical care, and I’m pretty sure our old doctor should have his licence removed.”

Tofu nodded and left the holding room.

“Well, you heard him. Hot beverages only as long as you’re a guest here,” Ibari said. “I’m not making that mistake twice.”

The teen said nothing.

“What’s your deal anyhow, kid?” Genma asked. “I know the master made plenty of enemies, but what did he do to you that’s so terrible?”

The teen opened his mouth, before pausing to rethink it. “It’s too terrible to say.”

“I suppose that’s fair,” Genma replied. “Well, it’s pretty awkward just calling you ‘boy’ or ‘kid’. Do you have a name?”

The teen’s face scrunched up in rage. “I said I wasn’t going to say.”

Genma blinked. “Wait, it’s your name that’s the terrible thing the master did to you? I... it can’t be that bad? It’s just a name.”

The boy glared.

“Fine, whatever,” Genma said, shrugging and walking back to the others. “Well, do you know where the master is, Soun?”

“I don’t think so... wait!”

“You remembered where he is?” Ibari asked.

“No, not that. I, um, I remembered that Kousaku was spending some time with his friends after school and no one’s actually told him what’s happened.”

The other two men looked at each other, silently asking the other one how he forgot about the lad.
Unwanted Romantics

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“Hello?” Kousaku offered to the silence, as he found that the dojo too was empty.

Taking a deep breath, he tried to keep himself centered. There weren’t any police around, so it probably wasn’t an evacuation due to a gas leak or something. So... maybe they just thought he’d be at Hiroshi’s long enough to eat dinner there, and all went out somewhere?

That seemed plausible enough. Though it left him without dinner. And he was kind of hungry.

A few moments later, Kousaku was rifling through the cupboards, looking for something a bit nicer than instant noodles to prepare. Especially since those noodles would be Nabiki’s, and he wasn’t about to risk her wrath for eating her food.

Eventually he settled on frying some egg to make into a sandwich. Then it was time to work on homework, which took most of the next couple hours (in part because he got distracted by a manga a few times).

With the sun setting, he was starting to get genuinely concerned. Kousaku was starting to debating phoning the police when the telephone began to ring. Hurrying over, he almost tripped in his rush to reach the phone.

“T-Tendo residence, S-Sakamoto Kousaku here,” the boy said, trying to keep his growing worry out of his voice.

“Ah, good, Kousaku,” Soun’s voice said from the other end. “I just want to let you know that we’re all okay. We’re just at the Oozora’s... there, well, there was a bit of an incident, but, like I said, we’re fine now.”

“I-incident? What kind of incident!?” Kousaku asked. Images of ambulances and hearses danced in his head.

“A bit of a martial arts feud... you wouldn’t happen to know where the old master is, would you?”

Kousaku blinked. How was he supposed to remember something as trivial as that when he was this worried... “I... Okinawa? He wanted to drag me off to enjoy the ‘last hurrah of beach season’ or something.”

“Huzzah! Fantastic, my boy!” Soun exclaimed. “Oh, and we should be home in a few hours, don’t worry. See you then.”

With that, Soun hung up.

At least Kousaku had a couple of answers, but it also felt like he had more questions now.

* * *

“You’ll be glad to know we’ve got a location on the little creep,” Ibari said as he stepped into the holding room. “Now, as much as I hate you for what you did to my little girl... I’m willing to make you an offer.”
“Yeah?” the prisoner offered noncommittally.

“I’ll give you the information of where he is, if you agree to take him somewhere far away. Since you can fly... dropping him off in Siberia sounds nice.”

The teen shrugged. “Sure, can do. So, where is he?”

Ibari shook his head. “Not until you’ve healed up a bit. Break open those stitches and you’ll need even more recovery time.”

---

The next day had gone peacefully. Rie clung on to every detail of the story, though she could tell certain things were being glossed over. She was glad to see Ukyo seemed to be on good terms with the others now though. She’d been avoiding work out of solidarity with her friends, but... she was rather missing the spending money, and didn’t want to be adding to tensions herself. Still, she made sure to catch up to Ranma just as school ended, noting with interest the boy had gone girl and was dressed up rather cute now.

“S-Saotome,” Rie started, trying to get the other girl’s attention.

“Oh, hey! Rie, what’s up?”

“I... you and Ukyo-kun, are you two on better terms now?” Rie asked.

Ranma took a moment to think it over. “Y’know, I think so? Not totally back to being besties, but... Ucchan bein’ ready ta take a beatin’ for Suzume’s rebuilt most of my trust.”

Rie smiled and nodded. “I’m so happy to hear that. And, have a good afternoon. Bye!”

With that, Hibari headed off to Ucchan’s. Hopefully things wouldn’t be too tense.

It only took a few minutes to get to the restaurant, where Rie was surprised to find a small group of confused patrons waiting for the restaurant to open. Having seen Ukyo leave earlier, Rie tried to reassure the customers before slipping around to the service entrance. The girl then pulled out the key she’d been given and headed into the restaurant.

To her shock, she found Ukyo passed out behind a sizzling grill. Rie rushed over, shutting the grill off, before dragging Ukyo upstairs. The chef was sweating fiercely and seemed hot to touch. Ukyo’s cheeks were also bright red.

Fearing what could happen if she didn’t help with the chef’s condition, Rie decided it she had to cool the other teen off immediately. The first step was opening some windows and turning on a fan. Then, turning about as red as Ukyo was, Rie began removing some of the chef’s outer layers. The undershirt was next, as Rie was sure it had to be hindering heat flow. Trying not to get too flustered by Ukyo’s well toned form, Rie hurried down to the freezer, grabbing ice trays and wrapping them in paper towels, before running back upstairs to place the ice against the chef.

The cold began to cause Ukyo to stir, and, after a couple moments, Ukyo’s eyes opened.

“Oh man, it was so hot,” Ukyo mumbled absently.

“Are you feeling better?” Rie asked nervously, leaning in.

Suddenly Ukyo’s eyes opened fully and the chef bolted upright, hands covering a bare chest. “I-I can
explain!”

Rie blinked. “Explain what?”

Ukyo stared as Rie, before slowly glancing down at their own chest. “Oh. Right. They’re gone right now... uh... but now I probably have to explain.”

“Are.. are you like Shui then?” Rie asked.

It was Ukyo’s turn to blink in surprise. “P-pardon?”

“Oh no... did you not know? I... oh no.”

“I might know, depending on what we’re talking about. Though, if I’m wrong... Shui might honestly kill me for leaking that secret.”

Rie paled. “I... Shui might not be happy if I tell you what I figured out if you didn’t know... d-do you really think he’d kill someone?”

“Maybe.”

The two teens sat quietly for a moment, trying to figure out how to probe which secret the other was talking about, without revealing their own due to possible threat of death.

“How about we just phone the Nekohanten and do this the most honest way?” Rie offered.

“I... yeah. Especially since there’s a lot to explain,” Ukyo replied. “Tell Shui openly is probably our best bet at avoiding murderiness.”

* * *

It was about an hour later than Rie found herself in the upstairs living room of the Neko Hanten. She swallowed nervously as Shui entered the room. The teen had always been nice to her before, but revealing she knew a major secret was rather nerve wracking.

Having Shui sit directly in front of her, Rie was overwhelmed with a mixture of fear and the sight of just how handsome Shui was.

The Chinese teen smiled gently. “Whisper secret to me, I will know if it is what Kuonji knows.”

Rie nodded, and leaned forward. She could smell Shui now and... the smell was rather fruity. Watermelon, probably?

“I...I know y-you’re Sh-Shampoo,” Rie whispered, before jumping back and slipping behind Ukyo for safety.

Shui’s red eyes went wide. “You... how? And, yes, spatula boy knows.”

Rie nodded, and leaned forward. She could smell Shui now and... the smell was rather fruity. Watermelon, probably?

“I...I know y-you’re Sh-Shampoo,” Rie whispered, before jumping back and slipping behind Ukyo for safety.

Shui’s red eyes went wide. “You... how? And, yes, spatula boy knows.”

“I, well... at the beach, Mousse kept bringing up Shampoo and started chasing you around, so I had to wonder... and then after school the one day, I-I snuck a flower petal in your hair, and it stayed there after you changed,” Rie explained, keeping most of her body behind Ukyo still.

“Stupid Mousse,” Shui sighed. “And, Kuonji... why did this come up?”

“I... well, apparently getting cat tongued was a terrible idea when you work over a grill all day, because I passed out from the heat... Rie pulled off some of my clothes to try to help cool me off, and
I worried she’d see things that aren’t there right now,” Ukyo replied, blushing slightly.

Shui burst into laughter, snorting a few times, before finally getting the fit under control. “Oh man... I’m sorry. I forgot to warn you about that... Then again, you did ask me for help at close to midnight when I was getting ready for bed. Wa...n’t totally awake. Well, we have a spare Phoenix Pill, don’t worry. Been keeping one on hand just in case.”

“Oh thank goodness. I can only handle being closed so many days before my accounts slide into the red,” Ukyo replied.

“So, um, Shui... why do you tend to be a girl for work?” Rie asked, finally sliding out from behind Ukyo as she realised she wasn’t in any real danger now.

“It’s how I like to be,” Shui offered with a shrug.

That, however, confused Rie more. “It is? Th-then why are you at school as a boy? I... is it about getting into the boys’ change room?”

A smirk spread across Shui’s face as Rie blushed at her own question.

“Nah. To be honest, I like looking at girls just as much as boys. Maybe more... but that might just be from being in love with more girls than guys right now,” Shui replied. “I was signed up as a guy though for... complicated reasons.”

Rie was still blushing, a little flustered by Shui’s casually admitting to liking girls (which felt weird to think was scandalous considering how Shui was the most popular ‘boy’ in school with the girls), but an offer she made to Ranma echoed in Rie’s head, and she felt it appropriate to give to Shui too.

“S-since you have to spend so much time as a guy, if... if you ever want to hang out with a friend as a girl, I’d be happy to,” Rie said, trying to give a warm and friendly smile and a slight bow.

Shui’s eyes lit up, before the handsome teen launched over and hugged Rie. “Yes! That sounds wonderful!”

Rie found her brain overheating, and half wondered if steam was coming out of her ears. The cutest boy in school was hugging her... but was also a girl who was obviously hopeful for more chances to embrace her femininity. Rie was going to have to work on keeping these things straight.

Finally released from the hug, Rie took a moment to breath, before remembering who else was in the room.

“I, er, Ukyo-kun, I... did you want to hang out as girls at all?” Rie asked.

“Ooh, yes. Do tell!” Shui added, leaning forward.

Ukyo stared at the other two blankly. “It, uh, honestly hadn’t occurred to me? I’ll have to think about it.”

“I-if you don’t want to... that’s fine,” Rie replied apologetically. “If you prefer being a boy... well, I had completely thought you were one until this point, so it doesn’t change anything? N-not that—”

“Rie-chan, breath,” Ukyo said. “I’ll think about it, okay?”

Rie nodded, blushing once again.

* * *
Hibari was doing her best to run through some balancing exercises in the Oozora dojo, despite her bandaging and sore arm, when one of her father’s men knocked at the entrance.

“Come in,” Hibari said, slowly extending a leg and shifting her body.

“I, uh, ya’ve got a letter, miss,” the man replied.

Hibari smiled. Nearly all the goons were calling her feminine titles (at least to her or Ranma’s face), and that was such a welcome improvement to how they’d been before.

“One moment,” Hibari replied, slowly lowering her leg back down, until she was in a normal standing position and able to turn to the man.

He handed her the envelope and scurried off almost before she’d managed to say ‘thank you’. The blonde girl had to frown slightly, before trying to figure out the best way to open an envelope with a broken arm (at least Ranma’s little potion meant she’d probably need a couple more days of the cast, rather than weeks). Eventually she managed, and pulled the letter out.

“‘Dearest lark, how I love to see your free spirit flying across the open sky. Yet how much more I long for thou to come and rest in my heart’... the heck does that mean?” Hibari grumbled, double checking for any address information on the envelope.

All it said was the English letter ‘J’.

Hibari headed into the main house, looking for either Ranma or Tsugumi for a second opinion. Ranma she found very quickly, the other girl having an envelope of her own.

“Hey, Hibari, I just got the weirdest letter,” Ranma said, “Somethin’ about bein’ a noble wild mare needin’ a field ta call home? You got any idea what that could mean?”

“Is there any information on the envelope?” Hibari asked.

“It just has a, uh, a ‘J’ on it,” Ranma said, flipping the envelope to double check it.

“Pretty much the same as the letter I got then,” Hibari said, holding up her own envelope and letter. “I think it’s a love letter, but it seems almost more focused on being poetic than anything.”

“Y-ya don’t think Akane’s samurai’s fallen for us, do ya?” Ranma asked, naming the only person she could think of who was obnoxious enough to send a letty like that.

Hibari shook her head. “He seems pretty single minded in his focus on Akane. And sees you as a guy anyway.”

“Hm... well, whoever it is, I ain’t sure I like him sendin’ weird poems ta my fiancee... or me.”

* * *

Ootori Jun’s face was buried in her hands as she sat at the breakfast table. She couldn’t believe what her mother had just told her.

“Why must you butt into everything?” Jun groaned, still not looking up.

“My dear, I cannot sit back and see my daughter struggle so in her efforts to woo two lovely girls,” the professional otokoyaku declared. “So, embracing my current role, I asked myself what Mr. Darcy would do in your shoes.”
Jun turned to her brothers, hoping for support. Sadly none seemed ready to face the wrath of their mother.

* * *

Hibari, Ukyo, Ranma (in girl mode after an incident with a water fountain), Shampoo, and Rie sat together on the school roof, enjoying their lunch break. There were probably only a few weeks left before the fall weather started to make it a bit too chilly up there.

“So, Ranma, I’m sorry... I couldn’t keep the lock up,” Ukyo was explaining, having summed up the events of the evening before. “I’ve only got so much in the way of savings, and need a buffer in case anything major breaks.”

“It’s okay, Ucchan,” Ranma replied. “I’m not even sure locking yourself as a guy would prove anything... Nannichuan magic seems to make your life easier. What you did to help Suzume helped a lot though.”

Hibari nodded. “I really appreciate that too. I really wish things weren’t so awkward thanks to that dumb panda engaging Ranma left and right, so we could be friends without any tension.”

The sound of the nearby door opening distract the five girls from their conversation. A familiar looking girl with a cropped black pixie cut stepped out. Jun scanned the roof a moment, before spotting Ranma and Hibari. The girl half jogged on her way to them.

“Saotome, Oozora! I... I just heard about your injury, Hibari, I’m so sorry. I hope it heals up soon though,” Jun said, her tone quite genuine.

“What do you—J! You’re J, aren’t you, Jun?” Hibari declared, pointing a finger on her good arm at the volleyball captain.

“So you did get the letters. I was actually coming to apologise about those. They were my mother’s doing. That woman refuses to leave anything alone. I’m sorry,” Jun explained.

Four of the five girls gave Jun very unimpressed looks. (Rie was incapable of that level of visible sass, and stuck to nervously studying her bento box.)

“I’m serious. I’ve asked her to stop, but... if you get any more, please do tell me, so I know to ask her more forcefully,” Jun explained.

“Listen... Jun, you’re tryin’ ta be polite, so I’m going to say this about as nice as I can manage: my love life is already a mess, and I don’t need more people tryin’ ta get involved, got it?” Ranma snapped back. To be honest, it annoyed her a bit that she couldn’t, but she was enrolled as a guy, and didn’t think there was any real way to change that (especially as Shui had yet to change her enrollment information).

Jun looked ready to argue further when the door opened again. A few girls appeared, all wearing volleyball team uniforms.

“Jun-sempai, weren’t we supposed to be practicing?” one of the girls asked.
Jun blushed a bit. “Right, yes! I’ll talk to you two later, but I have to go.”

The five girls watched her run off, waiting until the door was closed behind her before letting out sighs of relief.

“I’m gonna be honest, with the kidnappings and everything else going on... I kinda forgot about that volleyball stuff,” Ranma said, before diving into her lunch to make up for lost time.

“Totally figured she’d have given up by now,” Hibari replied, starting to eat her own.

“Maybe you could try sending Sabu to spook her off?” Ukyo offered.

The blonde shook her head. “Invoking Yakuza resources over high school drama, especially something petty, like sports, which this is ‘officially’ about, is total overkill. Ranma and I can handle it on our own. Be a major loss of cool points to overreact like that.”

Ukyo pouted a little, arms crossed. “Alright... If I were a Yakuza heir I’d totally use my resources for trivial things.”

“Honestly, same,” Shui added. “Making other people do your work for you is very fun.”

Ranma giggled a little. “I’d be careful about saying you want to part of Yakuza families around Hibari’s old man. He’d have either of you in wedding dresses before you knew it.”

As Shui blushed and Ukyo paled, the last girl present couldn’t help be be slightly concerned.

“I think they’re both a bit young, don’t you?” she asked.

“How are they-Oh!” Ranma gasped. “I... uh, it ain’t quite what ya think, but... it’s complicated.”

Rie remained confused as Hibari glared at Ranma and the curvy cute replied with the most innocent eyes she could muster.

* * *

“I forgot she was there, I’m sorry,” Ranma apologised once more, as he and Hibari approached the Oozora compound. (He’d returned to male for gym class, as it seemed less of a hassle than trying to join the girls would likely be.)

Hibari sighed. “I just want you to be more careful in future, okay? I... I get that Rie might be okay to tell, but... pretty well anyone else is a risk.”

“I’ll try... I’m just not that great with secrets,” Ranma muttered, studying the ground as he walked.

“I wish it didn’t have to be a secret either, but it does. I can just imagine how someone like Kaori and her cronies would react if things got out,” Hibari replied, before growing distracted by a white rolls royce parked out front of her home. “Oh, looks like daddy has a visitor.”

Ranma marvelled at the massive car a moment too, before he followed Hibari into the compound. The pair reached the genkan and removed their shoes.

“Ranma, my boy! It’s good to see you again!” a strange man called out from the hallway.

Turning, both teens were surprised by the large eared man in a baggy red hat.

“Who are you?” Ranma asked, not having even the slightest hint of recognition.
“Ah, yes. I suppose you were too young to remember me. Still, come on, I’ve got someone for you to meet and your father has a story to tell you!”

Ranma and Hibari followed the man cautiously. As they reached the meeting room, Ranma realised they were holding hands, but wasn’t sure who’d grabbed who’s hand.

In the room, they found a nervous looking Genma, a very peeved looking Ibari, a mysterious person in a bridal kimono, and Sabu sitting quietly in the corner watching the proceedings.

“Now then, Saotome, have you really not told your son about the engagement?” the mysterious man asked.

“There’s another engagement?” Ranma asked, sighing while admitting internally he wasn’t that surprised.

“Yes. Please do explain,” Ibari seethed through his teeth.

“Ah, well,” Genma began, eyes searching for an escape route. “W-when Ranma was very young, barely more than a baby, I went travelling with him on a training trip. We... we were running rather low on food, when I encountered Daikoku-san here. He said he didn’t need anything, apart for a male heir. S-so, well, I offered him Ranma, and was given a generous meal of rice, two pickles, and a herring. I later rescued Ranma, and thought the matter was done, but... well, as you can see, Daikoku-san’s good at finding people.”

Ranma’s eye twitched. “I’m worth a bowl of rice and a pickle to you, pops!?”

“I said two pickles and a sardine,” Genma replied, trying to give his most innocent face.

“Ahem. Well, we have a bit of an impasse,” Ibari said, glaring at both Genma and Daikoku. “Ranma is engaged to my Hibari, due to a much more significant debt accrued by his father. I’m not open to giving him up so easily.”

“I’m sure we can work something out. I’ve done quite well for myself financially. Perhaps I can pay Saotome’s debt? After all, it’s about the promise and acquiring a male heir, more than the material loss, for me,” Daikoku replied, his tone dismissive as he produced a paper fan to cool himself a bit.

“Sabu, what’s Saotome’s tab now?” Ibari asked.

The slick enforcer pulled out a calculator. “Well, let’s see. It was half a million yen for the initial loan. Then 650 grand for the second. Then, 12 years of interest, at 12% monthly interest levels... 4.8 million yen.”

Daikoku’s mouth fell open for a moment. “That’s a bit more than expected.”

“Ooh. I like that worth estimate a lot more than a bowl of rice and a sardine,” Ranma added, smiling towards Hibari.

“Along with two pickles,” Genma added weakly. “And it was a herring.”

“That’s not counting fees for breach of contract,” Ibari replied flatly.

To the surprise of nearly everyone, the mysterious person in the bridal kimono slid forward, whispering into Daikoku’s ear.

“What a good idea, Kaori!” the man declared. “There’s a martial arts competition coming up this
weekend. What say you to my girl challenging your daughter for Ranma’s hand? The winner gets the boy?"

“My dau-ah yes, Hibari?” Ibari said, before glancing nervously towards the girl in question.

“Well, apparently as a practitioner of Anything Goes, I have to accept,” Hibari replied, side eyeing Ranma who gave an apologetic look.

“Excellent! The Martial Arts Delivery Girls Competition will be such a good time,” Daikoku declared.

Chapter End Notes

Oh, and I don’t know if anyone is interested, but, I have a Hibari ask blog on tumblr. Feel free to ask whatever. https://askoozorahibari.tumblr.com/
“Martial Arts Takeout?” Shui asked, as the usual quintet sat around eating lunch under a tree on the school grounds the next day.

“Yeah, that’s apparently the challenge. I need to manage a crash course on the techniques, and thought you or Ukyo might know. Since you both work with food, and, well, Shui, you do deliveries,” Hibari explained.

Shui nodded. “I’m not sure if Japanese standards would accept all my techniques, but I can try to help. After school, I will run you through a crash course.”

“Can I join in?” Ranma asked. “The wording of the challenge never said I couldn’t get involved. Just that it’s a ‘girls only’ competition. Seems especially unfair since Hibari’s arm’s still healin’.”

“Well, in that case, I think Shampoo will be happy to help too,” Shui said with a wink.

“Glad I have such nice girls I can rely on for help,” Hibari replied, leaning against Ranma with a smile.

“Oh, sh-should I help out too?” Rie asked, as much to Ukyo and Hibari.

“You’re still learning your cooking. Martial arts techniques are a few months of training away,” Ukyo replied, the chef’s tone was kind rather than dismissive however. “I don’t want to see you get hurt.”

Rie nodded. “Understood. I... what about you though, Ukyo-kun?”

“What about—oh! I... I’d need a disguise, I think. It would be awkward to get recognised,” Ukyo replied.

Suddenly Hibari and Shui lit up.

“Makeover challenge!” the pair declared in unison.

“As soon as you close up shop tonight, come visit my place,” Hibari added.

Ukyo blushed a little. “Well, since it’s for Ranchan’s sake, I’ll try. Not really a delivery girl, but I know my food.”

* * *

Hibari was downing a vanilla milkshake as she and Ranma waited in the backyard of the Neko Hanten. Mixed in was Ranma’s healing potion from that half-forgotten temple. Hidden in by vanilla, and with the calcium and calories needed for her body to heal the amount the potion allowed, it actually wasn’t too terrible to consume.

“I feel a little useless out here,” the curvier redhead muttered. “I’m gonna go in and help with the waitressin’.”

“I’m sure that, if it were busy enough to need you, Cologne would call on you. Heck, she’d probably tell me that a broken arm wasn’t a valid excuse for not waiting tables,” Hibari replied, laughing a little at the idea.
“Sittin’ still is the worst though,” Ranma sighed.

“Well, as long as Cologne pays you,” Hibari replied, sticking her tongue out.

The back door opened, revealing a somewhat annoyed Cologne. “We don’t need any help, and I’m not made of money. If you’re bored, practice some yoga or tai-chi to get warmed up.”

“You need to teach me your listening secret technique,” Hibari said.

Cologne gave her a flat stare. “Marry Shampoo and I’ll teach you any techniques you want.”

“I’ll admit, that’s a good bit of incentive,” Hibari replied, looking over at Ranma.

The other girl nodded. “We’ll take that bit inta consideration.”

Cologne smiled, a knowing glint neither teen could read in her eyes, before she closed the door.

Ranma hopped onto her feet, heading out to the more open part of the yard, and began running through some yoga techniques she’d picked up over the years. Hibari stayed seated, finishing her milkshake slowly as she enjoyed the view.

With the mixture of potion, milk, and ice cream finished, Hibari stood up and made an effort to stretch her arm.

“Still a little sore, but I think I’ll be good for tomorrow,” she said with a smile.

“Do you think you’re ready for practice tonight?” Ranma asked, pausing partway through a stretch.

“I can learn a bit by watching,” Hibari replied. “And it gives you more time to practice.”

“Tongzhi!” Shampoo announced, whipping the back door open. “Dinner rush is done! We can practice now.”

“Sounds good ta me!” Ranma replied.

Shampoo rushed over, hugging both redheads, before backing up a little and giving a bow. “Lesson begins now. Serious time.”

Shampoo clapped her hands, and a rather annoyed looking Mousse emerged from the restaurant with a large pot of ramen.

“Thank you, assistant,” Shampoo said, her tone not overly genuine.

Mousse grimaced as he bowed and returned to the kitchen.

The two redheads then watched quietly as Shampoo pulled out a pair of chopsticks and swirled them in the ramen. They wondered what she was doing a moment, when she suddenly pulled out a large clump and then, with a flick of her wrist she turned the noodles into a whip and lashed out, wrapping an end around a nearby tree. Twisting her wrist again, she caused the wrapped noodles to tighten around the tree, bark starting to peel off.

“This is essential noodle grab technique. It takes one hand, so is good for both tongzhi today,” Shampoo explained.

* * *
Two hours of Shampoo’s training proved that she was indeed Cologne’s great granddaughter. Hibari was barely able to get a moment’s rest thanks to her still sore arm. Ranma was fully exhausted, collapsing onto her bed when they made it home.

Shampoo herself was full of energy while she and Hibari waited for Ukyo to arrive.

Sitting in the main living room, the pair found themselves in an awkward situation of being in the same room as Ibari.

“So, you two seem to be spending a lot of time together lately,” the yakuza patriarch said, as casually as he could.

“Mhm. I can be a charming young man when needed, and tongzhi Hibari is fond of that,” Shampoo replied with a surprisingly cattish grin.

Ibari’s face slid through several different forms of unsettled. “Well, still...”

“I’ll only marry Hibari and Ranma,” Shampoo added sharply.

Ibari’s eye twitched. “I’m not sure that’s technically an option, legally and whatnot.”

“Oh, suddenly concerned about legality are we?” Hibari asked, leaning in with a smirk of her own.

Before Ibari could reply the sound of knocking at the door reached them. Shampoo practically launched herself down the corridor, leaving Hibari to scramble after her. She finally caught up to find Ukyo and Rie both at the door.

“Oh, both of you!” Hibari said as she went for a sliding stop that ended in Shampoo catching her. “Ooh, how dashing.”

Shampoo smirked. “Always happy to catch one as cute as you.”

“Is.... is this meant to be a fiancees only night? I can go,” Rie said nervously.

“No, those two are just shameless flirts,” Ukyo replied with a sigh.

The other two nodded happily, Hibari letting herself grow more comfortable in Shampoo’s arms.

“So, where’s Ranchan?” Ukyo asked, ignoring the flirtations.

“She’s taking a nap. Shampoo is a harsh sensei,” Hibari explained, finally standing up from Shampoo’s grip. “C’mon, let’s go up to my room.”

The three others followed her upstairs and to her cutely decorated room. As Hibari pulled out her makeup collection, Shampoo and Rie’s eyes lit up in admiration. Ukyo meanwhile found the sheer scope of it all intimidating.

“Alright, Kuonji, please take a seat. Shampoo and I shall work our magic... figuratively. No actual magic will be involved,” Hibari said.

Ukyo nodded nervously, before sitting down in the chair. What followed was a flurry of brushes, hair clips, wigs, smaller brushes, and... other strange makeup things Ukyo couldn’t identify. This was followed by a great deal of hemming and hawing by the two makeup specialists, who then turned the chef towards Rie.

“What do you think?” Shampoo asked.
Rie blinked, moving her head around a bit to see Ukyo’s face better. “Wow. Kuonji-kun looks very pretty... er, n-not that you don’t normally!”

“I usually aim for handsome,” Ukyo muttered.

“Oh! Sorry,” Rie apologised, bowing a bit.

“Do you want to see the effect now, or wait until you’ve got an outfit?” Hibari asked, leaning in a bit too close to the chef’s face.

“I think we’ll stick to just the face and wig bit for now?” Ukyo replied.

“Sure. It is getting a little late,” Shampoo replied grabbing one of Hibari’s wigs to put onto the chef, “Where is a mirror?”

“Over here!” Hibari announced, sliding open a folding mirror.

Ukyo turned to the mirror and was stunned by what was there. The chef wasn’t sure the blonde wig totally worked, but with the makeup the reflection looked like the feminine sister Ukyo never had.

“Wow. Looks like I can have an entry in the delivery competition. Though, I wonder if a dark wig might suit me more?” Ukyo said.

“Hm, yeah. Probably. Only have so many wigs on hand though... one second,” Hibari said, before slipping over to Ranma’s room.

A few moments later, the redhead returned with a black wig and a shorter redhead (who still looked half awake at best). Hibari then hurried over, switching Ukyo’s wig quickly.

“Hm, yeah, that definitely works better,” Hibari said. “What do you think, Ranma?”

The short redhead blinked, taking in Ukyo’s current appearance. “Ooh, lookin’ real cute there, Ucchan.”

Ukyo blushed a bit, not used to compliments from Ranma. “That Daikoku girl won’t know what hit her, with the four of us.”

* * *

Ibari stood in the holding room as Doctor Tofu gave the prisoner a final check over.

“Impressive, he seems to have healed up enough that I think we could remove the bandages,” Tofu said, as he walked over to Ibari. “Still a couple days until he’ll be fighting fit, at least. But he can definitely travel.”

The yakuza father nodded. “Well, boy, we’ve got plane tickets to Okinawa for you. Try not to change on the plane.”

The boy snarled. “I’d prefer not to be in debt to a man who’s happy to have a sex-flipping freak in his home, so I won’t be counting this as a favour.”

The prisoner started to give a smug smile when he found himself grabbed by the collar, Ibari leaning in and flaring up his monstrous chi projection. “The boy’s a little odd, but I don’t take kindly to family being insulted. It’s an internal matter, kid.”

The prisoner sneered. “Fine, whatever.”
Ibari let the boy go and dropped his monstrous projection. “I’ll be glad when you’re out of Tokyo.”

* * *

The gathering crowds were bigger than Ranma had expected. Hibari, on the other hand, was loving the crowd, as per usual. It left the shorter redhead smiling, glad to see her girlfriend enjoying herself. (And Ranma had to admit that Hibari’s playful roller skating maneuvers were cute too.)

The pair wandered around amongst the contestants, looking for Shampoo or Ukyo. Sliding through the people, they instead encountered someone they weren’t expecting.

“Akane?” Ranma asked.

“Hibari? Ran? You two are in this competition too?” the short haired girl replied.

“Mhm, Ranma’s got a new fiancee whose style is all about this stuff, and now we’re having to prove ourselves against her,” Hibari explained.

“Only you two would have something like that happen,” Akane replied, sounding as if she wasn’t sure if she should laugh or not.

“There you two are,” Ukyo’s voice called out, as the chef appeared in disguise. “Oh, and Tendo, hey there.”

Akane looked at the chef, confused until she noticed the spatula strapped over Ukyo’s shoulder.

“Kuonji-kun? Is that what your birth form looks like?”

Ukyo grimaced. “I mean, I am in birth form, but I’ve also got a wig and a load of makeup on.”

“It is not a load,” Shampoo grumbled from behind the chef. “Mediocre amount at most.”

Further conversation was interrupted by an announcement for all contestants to line up. Hibari and Ranma slid their way forward to the starting line, where they ran into the shiromuku kimono clad Daikoku girl, kneeling at the starting line.

“Yo, what’s up Daikoku?” Hibari said, trying to break the ice a little.

The girl turned slightly, with only her disapproving sneer visible. “I was hoping Ranma would be here to see me win.”

“Ranma’s where Ranma needs to be,” the curvy cutie in question grumbled.

Suddenly Daikoku stood up, letting her white shiromuku fall away, revealing a more practical blue and red gi beneath.

“That had better be the finish line,” Daikoku Kaori declared as she lifted away her head covering to reveal brown shoulder length hair, cut with flat bangs.

“Confident, ain’t you?” Hibari grumbled, crossing her arms and leaning in confrontationally.

Kaori just smirked back.

The starter pistol going off a few seconds later caused most in the crowd to wince slightly, though Hibari was so used to the sound of gunfire that she almost forgot it signalled the start of the race. Then, half a moment later, there was a wave of scooters, skateboards, pogosticks, and rollerblades.
Ranma briefly found herself lost in the wave of taller people, cursing once again about how short her
girl mode was, before charging forward, hoping to catch back up with Hibari, who’d zipped off on
her rollerskates.

Deciding that sticking to the road wasn’t going well for her, Ranma leapt up onto a tree branch
alongside the road and began to ricochet along, off awnings, trees, and anything else that seemed
convenient. Soon enough she caught sight of Hibari again (her fiancee being up at the front of the
crowd), and bounded over to the taller girl’s side.

Landing, she arrived just in time to catch Hibari and Daikoku Kaori slide into a standoff at a bridge.

“You’re not half bad at racing,” Kaori said, “but let’s see how you are with the martial arts side of
this.”

With that, Kaori produced a pair of chopsticks, slipped them into her delivery box, and launched out
a whip of noodles. Hibari barely blocked with her own chopsticks, desperately defending her neck.

“You know, I have to really question the hygiene standards of fighting with a customer’s meal,”
Hibari snipped, trying to remember a counter as Kaori withdrew her whip.

“The cleanliness of it is all down to how clean you are, yakuza,” the brunette countered before
flicking out with another whipping strike. “I hope you washed your neck!”

This attack was countered by Ranma’s own noodle whip. The two tendrils of pasta wrapping around
one another into a tangled mess. “Try to remember that this race has more than one person against
you.”

“This is a duel for my fiance’s hand! I don’t much care for interruptions!” Kaori hissed, pulling back
to try and break her noodles free from the tangle.

The sound of a bicycle bell briefly drew the trio for their glares as they turned to the source

“Bu aishi! Out of the way!” Shampoo shouted as she zipped directly towards Kaori’s position
blocking the bridge.

The brunette yelped as she scrambled out of the way of Shampoo and her bicycle (the Jokestuzoku
girl seemed to be going fast enough to break most road speed limits, let alone that of a path, so Kaori
barely escaped impact).

“Hey! Get back here! This is my race to win!” Kaori hissed, sacrificing the noodles she’d used in her
whip in order to chase after Shampoo.

“Wait, if Shampoo wins, does that affect our engagement at all, with how the challenge was
worded?” Hibari asked.

Ranma scratched the side of her head. “I... I don’t think so. Oh, but if Ukyo wins, she might try
something.”

“More reason to win then,” Hibari replied with a wink.

The pair ran forward again, hoping to catch up to the others. After a few dozen metres, they were left
a bit unsettled by the discovery of Shampoo’s bicycle wedged through a tree. A few metres later they
discovered several heavily damaged trees from noodle whipping and chopsticks driven into trees and
walls.
“Destructive pair,” Ranma noted as they continued to race along.

Rounding a corner, they were surprised by the sight of Shampoo wrapped in noodles as Kaori stood laughing. “Hah. You’re good, but this is my focus.”

Kaori twisted her wrists and the noodle bindings grew visibly tighter around Shampoo. The brunette began to laugh some more.

Her laughter was interrupted by a pinecone to the head, chucked by Hibari.

“A pinecone? That’s not a delivery tool,” Kaori said, disgust dripping from her voice.

“It is *Anything Goes* though,” Hibari replied with a smirk while roller skating over.

She then launched a series of kicks, forcing Kaori to release her noodle grip on Shampoo. Ranma rushed over to help untie Shampoo, while Hibari and Kaori were engaged in a rather traditional martial arts fight.

“Oh, looks like all of you are having fun,” Ukyo said, as the chef hopped over the external wall of the park they’d all run through. “Since it looks like the three of you can keep Daikoku busy, I’ll focus on winning.”

Hibari posed a moment, rolling away from Kaori as she drifted briefly on her roller skates. “Wait a minute! I’m not going to let you win either!”

Kaori was visibly offended as Hibari raced off after Ukyo. “I’m not going to get ignored!”

Before she could chase after, she received a narutomaki to the cheek.

“I ain’t ignore ya. Let’s go,” Ranma declared.

“Listen, miss. I’d be happy to teach you a lesson another time, but I have to win over the hand of a rather handsome boy right now,” Kaori replied.

“How handsome?” Ranma asked, suddenly wanting some compliments.

Kaori smirked. “Hot enough to make me not mind finding out my father betrothed me to him as a baby. I’ll say that. Out of your league too, shorty.”

“I’m not so sure about that,” Shampoo said, having untangled herself enough to get to her feet.

“Don’t tell me she’s another fiancee?” Kaori asked, her one eye twitching.

“Not quite,” Ranma replied, pulling out her bowl of ramen, which was (impressively) still hot. The redhead then upended it on herself.

Only after transforming back to birth mode did Ranma remember that he was in a waitress’ outfit, that definitely wasn’t tailor for his height.

Kaori just stared in silent confusion.

“Wait, uh, Shampoo, do you got any cold water? It’s bit embarrassin’ to be dressed like this in boy mode,” Ranma asked.

“Sorry, I am keeping cold water as far from me as possible right now,” the girl replied. “Don’t want to get disqualified.”
“Hello Ranma. Hello Shampoo,” Akane called out as she skateboarded past.

“Right, need to finish the race. Good luck with Daikoku, tongzhi,” Shampoo said, jogging off.

Daikoku’s eye was twitching as she still struggled for a reply.

* * *

The crowd gathered at the finish line watched in suspense as the mysterious delivery girl for Ucchan’s hurried forward. The cheering began, as well as several boys shouting for the unknown cutie’s phone number, when a second contestant arrived: Hibari.

The redhead was zipping along in her roller skates at full speed in an attempt to steal first place. Ukyo smirked and spun around, releasing several globs of sticky batter towards Hibari’s feet. The other girl danced and dodged, but was losing precious seconds.

“This is a jerk move, Kuonji!” Hibari shouted.

Ukyo froze, then spun around, glaring at Hibari. Maybe trying to use this as an option to up their claim on Ranma rather than sticking to solidarity wasn’t the most honourable option, but it certainly didn’t warrant getting called by name in front of so many people.

Filled with rage, Ukyo rushed over, spatula drawn, to take out some rage on the yakuza heiress.

“Kuonji?” a boy in the crowd said.

“Oooh, are you Ukyo’s cousin!?” another asked. “Does he have your number?”

Ukyo froze mid swing. Their classmates really didn’t recognise them?

Unfortunately, Hibari didn’t have access to Ukyo’s internal thoughts, and only saw the chef charging her with that giant spatula. So Hibari responded with a punch to the gut on Ukyo. Hibari then slipped past Ukyo, heading towards the finish line. The chef might have been feeling a little guilty about overreacting, but that didn’t make losing any more appealing.

As such, Ukyo went for a tackle. The two were left grappling, when a third contestant arrived.

“Hey there you two,” Akane called out as she skateboarded past.

The other two watched in slight horror as Akane zipped over and crossed the finish line.

“Second place doesn’t matter for the challenge, does it?” Ukyo asked, taking a pause from trying to wiggle out of Hibari’s judo hold.

“Nope, it was only about first place,” Hibari replied.

“Let bygones be bygones?” Ukyo said.

“Sure, sounds good,” Hibari replied, releasing Ukyo from the hold.

The pair stood up, bowed quickly, and then jogged forward across the finish line themselves.

* * *

Hibari had decided to take everyone out for ice cream to celebrate Kaori not winning, and their crowded booth was getting some stares for being so noisy.
“Wait,” Akane said, having finally gotten the full story of the challenge. “The winner of the race was supposed to get Ranma’s hand?”

“Yeah... Kuonji got a little excited about that,” Hibari replied with a laugh.

The chef just blushed quietly and poked at their ice cream.

“That, um, that doesn’t mean I’m engaged to Ranma now, does it? I mean... not offense, Ranma, but, well, I don’t need that chaos in my life,” Akane asked.

“No offense taken,” Ranma replied, barely taking a break from her sundae.

“I think, with the wording of the deal, Akane could make a claim. Since she says no, then there’s no problem,” Shampoo added.

“Thank goodness,” Akane said with a sigh of relief.

* * *

Kaori sat in bitter silence as her father ranted at her. She wasn’t the one who’d set up an engagement with someone who had an ancient Chinese curse. Or three other fiancées.

“You didn’t even get in the top three. The family name is ruined!” her father roared.

“It’s one competition,” Kaori muttered.

“In Tokyo! With press coverage! You... I can’t bear the dishonour.”

Kaori stared at the floor, trying to avoid rolling her eyes.

“I’ve been too soft on you. You need time in the real world. You’re staying here in Nerima. Find a job. And then, if you win next year’s race, then you can return home.”

“Wait, what? That’s a massive overreaction!” Kaori blurted.

Her father shook his head. “Not at all. The family business is at risk from your miserable display. You have to rebuild your honour.”

* * *

Feeling broken, Kaori knocked slowly on the back door of the Neko Hanten. Shampoo had honestly impressed her, so if she hard to reform anywhere, it seemed a good shot.

A handsome looking boy with glasses opened the door. “Do you have a delivery?”

“I... I’m looking for a job,” Kaori said.

“Oh,” Mousse replied, before turning back to the kitchen. “Elder Cologne! We’ve got a job applicant!”

A moment later the tiny old woman appeared beside the short haired Mousse.

“What position are you interested in?” Cologne asked.

“Delivery girl, if possible?” Kaori asked.

“Ah. Unfortunately, I have more than enough delivery personnel,” the ancient woman replied.
Kaori let out a tired sigh. “Well... thank you for your time.”

“Try Ucchan’s,” Cologne offered. “They’re a bit understaffed over there. It’s just a few blocks east of here.”

“Thank you, ma’am,” Kaori replied with a bow.

The brunette set off down the road. She hoped there wouldn’t be too many stops before she found a job. Then she just had to find an apartment.

Once more she found herself knocking on a back door of a restaurant. This time it was a nervous looking blue haired girl who answered.

“H-hello there. Can I help you?” Rie asked.

“I’m looking for a job, and was told there may be an opening here?” Kaori asked.

“You want a job?” a handsome brown haired teen asked, appearing beside Rie. “What’s your availability? Do you have much cooking experience?”

“I was more thinking of doing delivery, but I do have full time levels of availability,” Kaori offered.

Ukyo’s eyes were filled with yen signs. “The lunch rush...”

“I can work lunch, yeah?” Kaori replied.

“Time to see if you can cook then!” Ukyo declared, grabbing the girl by the elbow.

What followed was the better part of an hour of Kaori trying to cook an okonomiyaki that Ukyo deemed passable. Kaori knew cooking reasonably well, but frying like this was new for her.

Finally she managed a (very guided) success.

“Not bad,” Ukyo said as the chef took a few bites. “Let’s get you into a uniform.”

Rie and Ukyo led Kaori to the back and handed her a uniform before nudging her into the washroom to change. When the brunette reemerged, Rie was struck by something.

“You know, you and Ukyo could almost pass for siblings,” Rie said, looking back and forth between the two brown haired teens.

The pair glanced at one another before nodding.

“Huh, how did I not notice that before?” Ukyo said. “Definitely need you to work on your cooking then. Can’t have someone thinking we’re related and then you mess up your okonomiyaki. Time to get serious before dinner starts.”

Kaori grimaced. She’d thought that they’d been serious already.
There’s No Business Like It

Hibari was starting to get ready for bed when she heard the phone ringing. Navigating through the mostly dark halls, she found her way to the nearest phone in a few rings.

“Hello, Oozora home,” Hibari began, when the sound of booming music came over the receiver.

“Hibari, is that you?” a feminine voice half shouted over the lively city pop remixes.

“Yes? Who is this?” the redhead asked. “Tsugumi?”

“Yes! I... I need your help. Kasumi’s... well, she’s very drunk. Can you come get her?”

“Where are you?” Hibari asked.


“Ooh, going for the family discount. That’ll make sneaking in easier too. I’ll be there in fifteen!” Hibari said. “See you.”

“Thanks,” Tsugumi replied, before hanging up.

Hibari turned around and raced upstairs. Tossing her closet open, hunting for her best clubbing clothes. Something spunky, but not going to revealing, she wasn’t looking for a date after all.

“What’s going on?” Ranma asked, poking his head in from across the divider.

“You should really knock. I was about to start getting changed,” Hibari replied with a wink.

“S-sorry,” a blushing Ranma replied. “But, uh, it doesn’t sound like you’re getting pjs on.”

“Nah. Going to a club. Tsugumi needs a little help,” Hibari explained. “Trying to pick out clothes that say ‘I’m hot, I know I’m hot, but I’m taken, sucker’.”

“That’s a very specific message,” Ranma replied. “Could I help?”

“My fashion sense is better than yours, but thanks for the offer, cutie,” Hibari said, pulling out a quite elastic sweater.

“I meant with whatever Tsugumi needs,” Ranma replied, trying to hide that he felt a little self conscious about his spotty fashion skills.

“Oh... I mean, sure? The more the merrier.”

“Cool, I try to pick something out too,” Ranma said.

Hibari, with her work out leggings, long form fitting sweater, bright makeup, and blue polka-dot bandana around her neck, she was sure she’d stand out well. Ranma’s return to the red bowtie and orange shirt look felt less adventurous, but wasn’t bad at least.

Skipping along the rooftops, Hibari let out a sigh when she felt a drop of rain on her cheek. The club would be so much easier to visit with it obvious her and Ranma were a couple. A few more drops of rain and she knew that rather than being able to sneak past as a couple, they were now going to both
have to deal with idiots flirting with them.

Hibari paused a moment, trying to figure out if the club would be likely to have any kettles. There was always the bathroom, she supposed.

“Hey, what’s up?” the shorter redhead asked, stopping beside Hibari.

“Just trying to figure out how to keep us from getting too many guys at the club flirting with us. Like, as boyfriend and girlfriend it works, but I don’t know if this drizzle is going to let up any time soon,” Hibari said.

Ranma grimaced. “Didn’t even think about that. Hm...”

“Tongzhi! What are you doing on neighbour’s roof?” Shampoo asked, staying warm and dry from her bedroom window.

The two redheads glanced at each other, before mischievous smiles grew on their faces.

“Have you ever been to a nightclub?” Hibari asked.

“I do not think so?” Shampoo replied. “That is, like, disco, yes?”

“Yeah, like a disco. How’d you’d like your first time at one to involving being a stud with two hot girls to either side?” Ranma asked.

“Are the ‘hot girls’ you two?” Shampoo asked in return.

The redheads nodded.

“I would go to a convention for font design if it meant going with you two,” Shampoo replied. “Give me five minutes to get dressed!”

The pair hopped down to the relative dry shelter of the entranceway of the of the Neko Hanten as they waited. Shampoo had been good to her word, and barely five minutes later she appeared in male form, one more pulling out the Mao jacket and skinny jeans combo, though she’d got for a lilac dress shirt and silver tie this time.

“Lead the way,” Shui announced with a smile.

Ranma and Hibari each grabbed one of Shui’s hands and took off, racing down the street. The Green Crocodile was only a few blocks further west, easy to spot with the large line out front.

“That’s gonna take forever,” Ranma said, sighing as she took in the length of the line.

“Not when you’ve got connections,” Hibari said, leading the other two straight to the bouncer. “Yo!”

The large man raised an eyebrow. “Trying to skip the line are we?”

“Yep,” Hibari replied with a grin.

The man narrowed his eyes. “What makes you think you’ve got that right?”

“I’m an Oozora. Your boss pretty much works for my dad,” the girl replied casually, her casual tone shifting to something more sharklike and dangerous. “Want some ID to prove it?”

The man paled. “S-sorry miss. Step right in.”
Then man move out of the way as he opened the door.

Stepping inside, both Ranma and Shui were assaulted by the volume of the music. Neither had been to concerts or similar venues, and found it all a touch overwhelming. After a moment’s hesitation they realised Hibari was heading off towards the booths without them and they scurried after her.

Hibari, for her part, was scanning for Tsugumi, and soon found her sister in a corner booth, a handsome man to one side and Kasumi to the other. The eldest Tendo sister was giggling away, and the others looked a bit tired.

“Sis!” Hibari called out as she raced over to the booth.

“Hibari, good to see you... I, oh... y-you brought Shui,” the older Oozora said, her eyes dropping to the table.

“Oh man. Sorry sis, forget that would still be a little awkward,” Hibari replied with a slight grimace. The guy beside her glanced at Tsugumi, then looked over at the dashing (if oddly dressed) Shui, and had his eye twitch slightly. “W-who’s Shui? A-an ex?”

“N-no. Not exactly,” Tsugumi replied, still studying her glass, a blush visible on her cheeks in even the low light of the night club.

“He saved my sister!” Kasumi added happily.

“S-saved your sister?” the handsome stranger asked, visibly grow more concerned.

“Oh yeah, she was kid-mrmph,” Kasumi tried to say, when Tsugumi placed a hand over her mouth.

“It’s a little embarrassing, probably best to not go into details. Right Shui?” Tsugumi said.

“What?” the cursed girl asked, not used to trying to follow conversations over music this loud.

Ranma slipped forward and placed a hand on Kasumi’s shoulder. “Come on, let’s get you some fresh air.”

“Yeah! I haven’t had a chance to talk to you lately either, Ran. We should catch up again,” Kasumi said, hugging the smaller girl tightly.

Ranma used that as an opportunity to scoop Kasumi up and pull her out of the booth. The unknown man looked a bit disoriented by the tiny girl’s display of strength, watching Ranma carry her out to Shui’s side before putting the taller girl down.

With the young man so distracted, Hibari slid into whispering range with her sister.

“You okay alone with him?” she asked, quiet enough only Tsugumi could hear.

“I’m not really alone,” Tsugumi whispered back. “The bouncers know who I am, and that they’d lose their jobs at the very least if anything happened. So they’re keeping an eye on me.”

Hibari nodded. “Alright. But I can wait up if you need?”

“I’m fine, go and help get Kasumi home,” Tsugumi replied.

“How much did she drink anyway? She’s pretty sloshed,” Hibari asked.
“Two drinks, but they were barely alcoholic. And then a little bit of one of mine after I called you,” Tsugumi said. “And I kept an eye on everything. She’s just really a lightweight.”

“Dang,” Hibari replied. “Well, see you tomorrow.”

Hibari then slipped out of the booth and over to the others. Kasumi was giggling away about something neither Ranma nor Shui seemed to follow.

“Well, I’d stay for a drink or two, but I suppose we should really head out,” Hibari said as she caught up to the others.

Shui and Ranma nodded, and the trio lead Kasumi out, despite the older girl’s insistence on shouting compliments to almost everyone they passed. Finally they were out into the cool evening air again, the drizzle having shifted to a heavy fog while they were inside. The quartet walked along quietly enough, Shui’s ears still ringing a little.

Suddenly the cursed girl found Kasumi’s face mere centimetres from her own.

“Y’know... you’re really handsome. If you were a couple years older I’d totally date you... hmm. I think it’s fine actually. You’re cute enough. If you’re—if you’re okay with dating an older woman?” Kasumi asked, her cheeks rosy with a mixture of alcohol and embarrassment.

“T-thank you, but I am not really in market right now?” Shui offered.

Kasumi pouted, and the result was quite adorable. “Are you sure? I know I turned twenty today, but it’s not really that old?”

Ranma and Hibari slid in between them.

“A no is a no,” the pair said in unison.

“Okay... Is Shui your boyfriend, Ran?” Kasumi asked. “I remember Kousaku said you had one. But then you’re Ranma... Oh no, was I not supposed to say that?”

Ranma found herself blushing furiously. “I... Sh-Shui knows. And, uh... we’re, uh, not really a thing.”

“Really? You seemed very jealous,” Kasumi said, giggling a little. “I think there’s something there.”

Flustered, Ranma turned to Hibari. The taller girl gave a shrug.

“It’s complicated,” Hibari said.

“Oh... but Ran, you should visit again more. Or Ranma... I like both of you,” Kasumi said.

“Sorry about this,” Shui said, stepping forward and poking Kasumi just behind the ear.

To Ranma and Hibari’s surprise, Kasumi passed out an instant later, being caught by Shui as she fell forward.

“It’s late. We have school. Getting her home awake was going to take forever,” Shui replied with a nervous grin.

“I really want to learn that trick,” Ranma said.

“Same,” Hibari added.
“Ah, well... would need Great Grandmother’s permission to share,” Shui replied while trying to figure out a dignified, yet comfortable, way to carry Kasumi.

With the Kasumi asleep, the walk along the foggy streets of Nerima was fairly peaceful. Hibari slid over to hold Ranma’s hand after about a block. She noticed the shorter girl was glancing back Shui’s way from time to time, a guilty blush on Ranma’s face whenever she did. Hibari couldn’t blame Ranma though, she’d found herself checking out Shui too.

Shampoo was just too attractive, whatever her form.

The trio (plus sleeping Kasumi) were getting close to the Tendo home, when the sleepy Tendo began to stir.

“Good timing,” Ranma said as she raced up and knocked on the front door.

The others had caught up when the door finally opened, revealing a somewhat sleepy looking Nabiki.

“Oh. Kasumi brought home some nice eye candy,” Nabiki said with a smirk. “And she told daddy he didn’t have to worry about her picking up anyone.”

“Well, she did *try* to pick up Shui,” Hibari said with a laugh.

The eldest Tendo blinked awake, lighting up when she was her sister.

“Na-chan!” Kasumi proclaimed, sleepily/drunkenly tumbling forward to hug her sister, and effectively tackling Nabiki onto the floor.

“How much did you drink?” Nabiki asked, struggling to breath a little from her sister’s bear hug.

“So much,” Kasumi said in a tone that seemed to imply she thought she was whispering.

“Two and a half cocktails, apparently,” Hibari added.

Kasumi broke her hug (which allowed Nabiki to breath), and began to nod sagely. “I’m a woman of the world now.”

“Does that mean what she’s thinkin’ that means? ‘Cause I don’t think it does,” Ranma whispered to Shui.

The cursed girl just shrugged. “I am no Japanese language master.”


“What’s going on down here?” a sleepy Akane asked as she came down the stairs, Kousaku not far behind her.

“Akane!” Kasumi half shouted before glomping her youngest sibling into a hug. “You look so ‘punk’ with that hair. You should embrace it!”

“That explains nothing,” a confused Akane replied, looking to Ranma and Hibari for help.

“Sis is drunk,” Nabiki explained. “Anyway, since it’s stopped raining, do any of you need a kettle? It’s the least we could do, with you helping to bring out sister home and everything.”
“I’m good,” Ranma replied.

“Wouldn’t mind a kettle,” Shui replied.

“Wait, he’s got a curse?” Kousaku asked, whispering to Akane (and Kasumi, since she was hugging Akane).

“You can follow and find out,” Akane replied with a very Tendo mischievous grin.

“I want to see too,” Kasumi declared, breaking her hug and hurrying to the kitchen.

Upon arriving, she found herself blocked by Nabiki from actually touching anything.

“You’re way too drunk to operate anything in here... apart, maybe, for the fridge,” Nabiki said.

Kasumi pouted, but it didn’t sway Nabiki in the slightest. Instead, she and Kousaku just watched quietly while Shui waited for the kettle to warm a bit, then poured it on her head.

Kousaku’s jaw dropped. “Th-that obnoxiously handsome guy’s r-really a... a super cute girl?”

Shampoo gave him a peace sign and a quick wink, which lead to a furiously confused blush on poor Kousaku’s cheeks.

“Does this mean I’m a lesbian?” Kasumi whispered to Nabiki.

“Do you still think she’s cute?” Nabiki asked flatly.

“Um... well, she’s really pretty. But... more like how I know you and Akane are cute?” Kasumi replied. “Certainly don’t have... um... words. I’m after words.”

“You don’t have the hots for her anymore?” Nabiki offered.

Kasumi replied with a blush. “That’s one way to put it!”

“I think I’ve got the hots for her now,” Kousaku muttered, before his eyes went wide as he realised what he’d said.

“I would stay and flirt, but have school in the morning, sorry,” Shampoo replied, heading off towards the street.

Ranma and Hibari also gave their goodbyes and set off into the street with Shampoo.

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Akane and Nabiki were waiting patiently for their instant noodles to heat when a very sleepy Kasumi wandered into the kitchen.

“Did... did I kiss Shui last night?” Kasumi asked as she stared out the window. “I remember being very close...”

“Yep,” Nabiki replied, winking at Akane while Kasumi was distracted.

“Oh my... Apparently drunk me is something of a cradle robber,” Kasumi said.

A laugh burst out from Nabiki. “A two year age gap doesn’t count as cradle robbing, sis.”

“Ah, that’s good to know,” Kasumi mumbled as she popped the freezer open and popped an ice cube into her mouth. “I hab no ibea ‘ow do beal wid hagobers.”
Genma was lying on the outer yard of the Oozora home, a panda again after a morning spar with Ranma. He found it stressful that Ranma was getting better at fighting, while growing ever more open to exploring femininity. The child hadn’t just gone to school as a girl, which was happening more and more often, but in a skirt today.

The most unsettling thing was how Ranma’s female face, smiling away so innocently, was the spitting image of the face Genma found himself fearing more and more each day. Why had he come up with that dumb contract?

“Uncle Saotome?” Tsugumi’s voice called out as she walked out with a kettle. “Can I ask you for help with something?”

#What with?# Genma’s sign asked.

“Well, you see... I’ve found a new boyfriend, but my father isn’t much a fan of actors, and, well, this new boyfriend is an actor. But, father does seem fond of you. So, I thought if you could vouch for him, it might help with the first impression?”

“Growf,” Genma replied as he sat up. He meant for it to be an affirmative reply, but wasn’t sure if that was clear.

Tsugumi poured the kettle onto his head as he tightened up his gi.

“I’ll give him an honest appraisal,” Genma said. “No promise he’ll pass.”

“Fair enough,” Tsugumi replied with a smile.

Genma headed off to wear something a little nicer than his usual gi, which translated to a t-shirt and a pair of jeans. He felt awkward, so overdressed, but figured it was best to give a good impression with this young man.

He then followed Tsugumi to the train station, heading towards the central part of the city, preparing for the multiple transfers involved to get back out to Setagaya and the film studio lots where her boyfriend was working.

After rather longer on a train than Genma was happy with, the pair arrived. There was a bit of finagling with security, but Tsugumi managed to get a guest pass that let them enter the property, though they weren’t allowed to access active film sets.

Wandering about the grounds a bit, Genma found himself a bit distracted by the variety of costumes... and the catering tables.

“So, do we know when he’ll be meeting us?” Genma asked as he piled up a plate of food.

“He said he’d be free around this time. I would guess that catering would make sense as a place to meet him on his break,” Tsugumi replied.

Genma nodded as he grabbed a bit of dessert. The next step was to find a table. Genma scanned a bit, when his eyes landed upon something he’d not expected to see: a panda.

And it was waving at him as it walked over.

“D-do I know you?” Genma asked nervously as the creature approached.

“Nrmph,” the creature replied, before smacking itself in the forehead. The creature then proceeded to
pull its head off.

Genma nearly fainted, before spotting there was a human head underneath.

“S-sorry. Always forget people can’t understand me with the mask on,” the handsome man beneath replied.

Genma placed a hand on his chest trying to calm himself. “That is an unsettlingly realistic costume.”

“Really? The effects guys will be thrilled to hear that... do you work at a zoo?” the young man asked.

“He spent a lot of time with pandas in China,” Tsugumi explained.

“Oh,” the man replied. “Th-that’s very interesting.”

“China’s an interesting country,” Genma replied, trying to sound authoritative. “So, is your role a starring part?”

“Heh, no... not really getting big parts,” the handsome man replied. “I, well... I don’t audition well.”

“You need to work on your confidence a little then, lad,” Genma said, starting in on his lunch.

“I know... but when I get too nervous my brain kind of shuts down and I make a fool of myself,” Tsugumi’s boyfriend replied.

Genma nodded as he gobbled up the last of his lunch. “Hmm... wait, that foreign looking guy over there looks important.”

“Th-that ‘guy’ is Steven Lucas! The American director!” the handsome young actor blurted.

“Are you dressed decently under that suit?” Genma asked.

“W-well enough?” the actor replied nervously.

“Good, good,” Genma replied, before yanking the young man out of the panda suit through the neck and dragging him towards the famous foreigner.

Genma proceeded to shove his way through the crowd of admirers around Lucas. The crowd around the director stared in disgust at his boorish behaviour, but Genma paid them no head.

“Steven-san! I’ve got good news for you. I’ve got you next leading man right here!” Genma declared as he plopped Tsugumi’s mortified boyfriend in front of the biggest director in Hollywood. “He’s a natural leading man. Just look at that face!”

The young actor’s jaw fell open as his eye twitched involuntarily.

“C’mon lad, introduce yourself!” Genma bellowed, smacking the lad on the back.

“Ta-Ta-Takakuro Yujiro, s-sir!” the man stammered, before closing his mouth.

“See? Great name for a leading man!” Genma declared, chuckling to himself, until he realised Yujiro had stopped exhaling and was swelling up like a frog.

“Um, what is—” Lucas began to ask, when Yujiro suddenly cut him off.
“I-I can juggle!” the young actor declared, grabbing drinks off of some of Lucas’ entourage.

He actually did decently for two rotations, when the drinks suddenly slipped out of his hands and proceed to all land on Genma. Suddenly the whole crow was staring at a Panda in tattered clothing.

“Wonderful! This is perfect!” Lucas declared in English, before switching over to Japanese. “I do not know how you do that, but it is what I am needing!”

#Martial Arts?# Genma’s sign offered.

“Amazing! You’re both hired! I needed a comedy duo for Space Crocs,” the director pronounced. “And I was thinking about an alien friend. So less makeup than man in suit! Wonderful!”

Tsugumi watched in confusion as Yujiro and Genma were whisked away by the entourage, leaving her alone beside an empty panda suit.

“Uh, should I return this somewhere?” Tsugumi asked to anyone in earshot.

“Don’t touch it and it’s not your problem,” a man in a samurai costume muttered.

“Pop’s got hired to be a movie star?” Ranma asked, as she and Hibari sat in the Oozora kitchen.

“Yes,” Tsugumi replied, still not quite believing what happened.

“I mean, that’s pretty cool,” Hibari said. “Didn’t think uncle Panda could manage something like that.”

“Yujiro was hired on too,” Tsugumi muttered.

“Yujiro?” Ranma asked.

“You met him at the club?” Tsugumi explained. “I met him a couple weeks ago. We’ve been dating for a bit, but... getting a contract like that... there’s no way he’ll be able to keep dating, let alone marry anytime soon like he was a talking about. Celebrities like that are under such constant observation.”

“Oh man, pop’s’ll be fired in no time,” Ranma declared. “Someone’ll catch him pocketing somethin’ or conning and old lady...”

“Maybe we can talk Yujiro out of it?” Hibari offered. “Get him to put love first?”

Tsugumi let out a tired sigh. “It’s probably a lost cause. I have the worst luck with men.”

Five days passed, and Genma hadn’t returned to the Oozora home. Ranma had enjoyed it the first few days, but that enjoyment slowly morphed into unnease. The pigtailed teen wasn’t used to spending so much time separated from Genma.

Hibari had noticed, and decided to slip into Ranma’s room on the fifth night, as the handsome boy lay there, staring at the ceiling.

“You okay?” Hibari asked as she sat down beside Ranma.

Ranma sighed, still staring up at nothing in particular. “Pop’s is an idiot who drives me nuts. I should be happy ta get a break from him.”
Hibari laid down beside him, wrapping an arm around Ranma as she rested her head on his shoulder. “Eh, my dad’s an idiot too, but it would be weird to not have him around. You just get used to things, especially family being annoying.”

“I think I’m gonna try to track him down tomorrow,” Ranma said. “At the very least just ta yell at him.”


The studio took the pair a little while to find, not knowing Setagaya very well. Still, it was easy to ask for directions, so it didn’t take too long.

The security guard was less than impressed by the young couple, however.

“What are you kids after?” the man asked.


“Right. And you can’t do that when he comes home?”

“He hasn’t been home in a while. Bit of a commute, so I guess they’ve set him up somewhere closer?” Ranma explained.

“Well, what’s your name? Maybe I’ll let you in,” the man muttered.

“Saotome. I’m Ranma. My pops is Genma. He’s doin’ that new Steven Lucas movie,” Ranma replied, feeling a bit of a smirk. He was actually kind of proud of his old man managing to do something substantial for once.

“Wait, you’re Panda-man’s kid?” the guard asked, hopping to his feet to lean in. “You don’t look that much like him.”

“Mhm, as his girlfriend I’m pretty happy for that,” Hibari said with a grin while leaning against Ranma.

“Do you know how to do the panda thing too?” the guard asked. “I’ve seen it, but only from a distance.”

“Ah, well... my ‘trick’ is a bit different,” Ranma replied. “I guess I can show ya? Just toss me some water.”

“Sure thing,” the excited guard replied, tossing a water bottle Ranma’s way.

The handsome boy open up the bottle and poured out a little. The guard stared in shock and the curvy cutie now before him. Ranma grinned and handed the water bottle back to him.

“W-wow. You could be a leading man and a leading woman,” the guard half whispered.

“So, can we head in?” Ranma asked, giving her cutest puppy eyes.

“S-sur. Here’s your passes,” the guard replied.

The pair gave their thanks with large smiles before heading off into the studio, walking hand in hand. After looking for signs, they realised that there wasn’t much in the way of directions visible.
“Huh, guess we just gotta start poking around,” Ranma said.

“Sounds fair. And then we get to see more of what they’re filming,” Hibari replied with a grin.

The first two sound stages were filming rather plain modern set films. Hibari was definitely more interested than Ranma in the one that looked like a romance, having to be dragged off by the shorter redhead.

The next soundstage was working on a tokusatsu movie of some sort with a miniature city.

“Ooh, that looks like fun,” Ranma said.

“If we’re not stopping for romance then we’re not stopping for kaiju,” Hibari muttered, grabbing her fiancee’s hand.

“Ah, but the miniatures are cool. And they let me feel like a giant,” Ranma complained as she was pulled away.

The fourth stage had a samurai movie filming, and the mix of romance and action distracted the pair for a few minutes, before they remembered they were hunting for Genma.

The next set was finally Space Crocs, with miniature spaceships, a dump truck with a rocket built into it, extras in alien costumes, and more chaos. Sneaking along, they found more and more people in costume, and began to feel like they were sticking out a little too much.

“Ooh, there’s a dressing room!” Ranma whispered to Hibari.

The taller redhead raised an eyebrow at how Ranma had pointed to the women’s dressing room without a moment’s hesitation. It made Hibari happy to see Ranma growing ever more comfortable.

The pair snuck in, Hibari digging along until she found a silver and blue little number she could only describe as a ‘space bikini’, with chain in places that made her quite certain it wouldn’t be water worthy.

Stepping back to look for Ranma, she found the pigtailed cutie fussing about while half undressed.

“Everything okay?” Hibari asked.

Ranma turned and suddenly giggled. “I was tryin’ that same look, but... I think I was one misstep from a wardrobe malfunction. So now I gotta figure out somethin’ with a bit more... I guess support?”

Hibari couldn’t help smirk. “Mhm, you definitely need more fabric in that area than me... well, unless you changed forms. I bet we’ve got enough makeup here to make sure no one would question the look.”

The shorter girl turned the same bright red of her hair. “I... that’s not... don’t be silly.”

“I’m not being silly,” Hibari replied with a pout.

Ranma kept blushing as she dug along, until she found an ivory collared shirt and dark vest. Tossing them on (after putting her sports bra back on), she decided that the look was sci-fi enough with her normal kung-fu pants.

“Waddya think, not half bad?” Ranma asked with a cocky grin.
“You look quite dashing,” Hibari replied, leaning in and giving Ranma a quick kiss on the cheek. Ranma’s cocky grin shifted to more of a goofy one in response, before shaking herself back into reality. “Right, we gotta go find pops now.”

The pair of girls slunk back onto the floor of the soundstage, hunting for a sign of Genma. After limited luck, eventually Ranma went up to someone with a bug-like alien head and cute pink pump heels.

“Yo! Have you seen Saotome Genma around?” Ranma asked.

“Saotome? Eh, he’s probably in his trailer. Total primadonna type, that guy,” the extra replied. “Give it 50/50 odds he’s getting a foot massage or something.”

“D’you know which way that is?” Ranma asked, feeling a bit like Ryoga with how little a sense of the place she had.

“North exit,” the ‘alien’ muttered, gesturing vaguely.

Ranma and Hibari gave a quick bow and thank you before racing off in the direction indicated. Getting outside they were surprised by the small sea of trailers, poking around until the saw one labelled ‘Saotome’.

Ranma knocked firmly, and then they waited. The better part of a minute passed before the door finally opened, revealing Genma in a red housecoat, sunglasses that didn’t quite suit his face type, and a bad toupee.

“What’s going-wait, Ranma? What are you doing here?” Genma asked, pulling his sunglasses off to revealing rather strong tan lines on his face.

“You’ve been missin’ without a word for the better part of a week. Wanted to make sure you hadn’t forgot about havin’ a so-er, kid,” Ranma said, crossing her arms and glaring up at her father.

“It’s really been that long? Wow... time sure flies when you’re having fun. Listen, boy... the money for this gig is really good. I could pay off my debt to Oozora with this paycheck, and then you won’t have to marry a guy,” Genma declared.

That got him a punch to the gut from both girls, causing him to double over and stumble back.

“I’m a girl, you idiot!” Hibari hissed.

“Seriously, get that through yer thick skull,” Ranma added. “Yeesh, and ta think I missed you at all.”

“You missed me?” Genma asked, a genuine sparkle of joy glittering in his eyes. Ranma turned away a bit, pouting, before reluctantly looking over her shoulder. “I’m used ta ya bein’ around. It’s weird ta have you gone for so long.”

Genma rushed over and pulled the short girl into a hug that lifted her off the ground. “That’s one of the nicest things you’ve said to me in years, my boy!”

“It’s too nice!” Ranma protested as she tried to squirm out of the hug. “You’re a big idiot!”

The loud shouts drew a few of the other stars out of their trailers, and all of them looked rather confused.
“Uh, Saotome, not to question your judgment,” a man who Ranma vaguely recognised from some movie or another said, “but that looks like a girl you’re holding?”

Genma set Ranma down and slapped her on the shoulder. “Haha! The boy looks like it, doesn’t he? It’s the same thing as my panda technique.”

“Right,” the actor replied, slipping back into his trailer, the look in his eyes saying that he wanted to keep his exposure to Genma to a minimum.

A few others eyed Ranma up suspiciously for a moment or two, before slipping back into their own trailers.

“Anyway, Ranma. Don’t worry. The shoots only a couple months. You can come visit your father any time too, boy,” Genma declared, slapping Ranma on the back again.

Ranma just grimaced. “Don’t hold your breath.”

Ibari glared across the table at the rather tired and defeated looking Genma who’d shown up after two weeks away at the film studio.

“You tried to run off without saying anything, and now you come crawling back why?” the large Yakuza patriarch asked.

Genma gave a weak smile. “Heh, well... it turns out that letting reporters know about the script and shooting plans violated some fine print of the contract. The fees took all the salary I’d made, so I don’t have many options.”

Ibari shook his head. “You always were focused on the quick profits... fine, Saotome. Since your martial arts lessons have been showing results for my men, I’ll let you back in. This time.”

Genma dropped into a deep bow. “Thank you for your kindness. You won’t regret it!”
Rie was headed home from her shift at Ucchan’s, feeling a little guilty about leaving Ukyo to close up alone as always, but she did have quite a bit of homework. How Ukyo managed to work those longer hours and stay on top of school, Rie could only wonder at.

As she began to cross a small river on her way home, she noticed a familiar teen in a white robe sitting by the water. Curiosity getting the better of her, Rie climbed down to the path along the river and walked over.

“Mousse-san, is everything okay?” Rie asked as she got closer.

The Chinese boy turned her way, his glasses on his forehead. He stared at her a moment, a sadness growing into his eyes, before he pulled his glasses down to see her properly.

“Hello... Kawai, was it? You’re Kuonji’s waitress, right?” Mousse said.

“Yes, that’s right. I... I suppose I’m a bit forgettable compared to the wild folks around here,” Rie replied, honestly fine with blending into the background. It put less stress on her.

“I think I heard that you and Shampoo have been getting on better terms?” Mousse asked, his voice flat.

“A little. Apparently she finds acting like a guy so much a bit stressful,” Rie explained.

Mousse slid his glasses back up onto his forehead and sighed. “That’s nice.”

“So, what has you out here, all on your own?” Rie asked.

“My life has lost its focus, and I don’t know what to do with myself,” Mousse said, turning back to the river. “My main goal in life has been trying to win Shampoo over for as long as I can remember. But now? Who knows.”

“You’ve really given up on getting Shampoo to fall for you?” Rie asked.

“She shaved my head. In our culture, that’s one of the greatest dishonours you could inflict on someone,” Mousse explained. “And I cut her hair, so... I insulted her almost as much.”

Rie nodded, not totally following it, but understanding that honour was very important to martial artist. (Well, most of them... Hibari seemed less invested in all that.)

“So, why are you staying?” Rie asked.

“I don’t know. I told myself it was because I didn’t want to see Shampoo end up with Saotome and Oozora. That the dishonour the curse brought onto her rivalled what I’d done by cutting her hair, and that I couldn’t see her end up having to play husband to two guys who wanted to act like wives, but... instead she’s a girl around them more often than not. They’re not doing anything as bad as I’d expected,” Mousse muttered. “So... I don’t know why I’m still here.”

“I guess it must be inertia at—wait, two boys?” Rie asked.
Mousse laughed quietly, confusing Rie. “It’s what I thought at the time, but... who knows anymore?”

Rie felt herself just as confused as before his response. She supposed she’d have to ask Hibari about that later... it could explain Shampoo’s reluctance about discussing why she’d gotten engaged to both Ranma and Hibari. (An engagement to two people confused Rie enough in general, extra layers were just a bigger headache.)

“It’s a bit strange talking to you though, without my glasses you look just like Shampoo. Same hair colour, similar height, and... and whatnot,” Mousse muttered, blushing slightly.

“Well, why don’t you wear your glasses more?”

“They give me a headache. And they look terrible,” Mousse replied.

Rie nodded, pulling out the case for her contacts and removing said contacts from her eyes to stow away.

“What are you doing?”

“I want to see what your prescription is like,” Rie replied. “Let me try your glasses.”

“Uh, okay,” Mousse said, handing his glasses over. “What was that in your eyes?”

“Contact lenses,” Rie explained as she put on Mousse’s cokebottle glasses. “Oof, who made these things? They’re totally different focuses, and... they seem bubbly.”

“They were a gift from the village glassworker. The pair I had as a child didn’t fit anymore,” Mousse replied. “But, what are contact lenses?”

Rie pulled the sloppy glasses off and turned to the fuzzy blob she knew was Mousse. “You get paid for your delivery work, right?”

“Lately, yes. I think she’s hoping I’ll buy a ticket back to China with the money,” Mousse replied.

“Well then, what do you say to going shopping for proper glasses tomorrow? We might even be able to get you some contacts. I don’t think your prescription is too much stronger than mine,” Rie replied with a smile that she nervously realised Mousse probably couldn’t really see.

Rie found herself a bit too nervous to eat lunch with the others. She knew she had to ask Hibari about what Mousse had said, but... she worried about it going poorly. After a bit of internal debate she decided there was nothing wrong with waiting another day.

“Is that Mousse?” Hibari asked as she, Ranma, and Shui headed off from school.

“It certainly looks like it,” Shui replied. “What are they doing together?”

“Well, we could follow and find out?” Ranma offered.

The other two nodded, and the trio set off, keeping their distance so as not to be seen. (And all of them struggling not to make too many quips about Mousse never seeing them, whatever they did.)

Rie and Mousse headed towards one of the main shopping areas nearby, the crowds helping the pursuers sneak closer. The shopping pair were utterly oblivious however.
“The optometrist isn’t too far away. The test should take about 20 minutes, and then we’ll figure out what your options are,” Rie explained.

Mousse nodded. He wasn’t really sure what to say, but the idea that proper glasses would be so much nicer than the ones he’d been left with for so long.

“Ah, here we are,” Rie said. “There shouldn’t be too long of a wait for an appointment.”

Outside, the following trio had an issue: the eyeglass store was much too small and quiet for the three of them to sneak in. After looking around a bit, they dipped into a nearby burger joint, Hibari and Rie grabbing a window seat while Ranma grabbed a few burgers.

“Mousse already has glasses. What are they up to?” Shampoo asked, before being distracted by Ranma also returning with milkshakes. “How hungry do you think we are?”

“I, uh... the cashier’s from Wakaba, and she, uh... maybe has a crush? She seemed really nervous,” Ranma explained as he sat down.

The trio ate their fast food impatiently as they waited for Rie and Mousse to exit the store.

Across the street, Mousse was just finishing up his eye test, and learned that his prescription needs were indeed within the range of contact lenses.

“We’ll try some a pair now, just to make sure they fit you comfortably, and that the prescription is a good fit,” the optometrist explained.

Mousse nodded, feeling almost giddy as the middle aged man prepped a pair of contacts for him.

“Here you go,” the man said.

“So, I just stick them in?” Mousse asked.

“I’ll let you know if you’re doing anything wrong,” Rie replied.

Mousse swallowed, feeling a bit nervous about sticking something in his eyes. He reminded himself that Rie did it every day, and took the plunge, slipping both in and blinked a couple times.

Suddenly the world was so much clearer than he was used to. Blinking and growing more used to it, he turned to Rie, wanting to thank her, when something else struck him.

“Kawai-san, you’re really quite beautiful,” Mousse said.

Rie blushed furiously, not used to being flirted with. Especially not by a boy as handsome as Mousse. Now that he wasn’t hiding his eyes behind those thick glasses or squinting to see without them, he was even more attractive. It was all too much for her, and she couldn’t manage a reply.

“This is so wonderful. Just saying thank you isn’t enough. I should buy you something. How about a nice dinner? Oh, and can we go see a movie? It’s been so long since I’ve been able to really enjoy watching one,” Mousse continued, grinning away.

“Sure, yes,” Rie replied, trying to ignore how this was basically transforming into a date with a boy who wasn’t just handsome, but also nice and tall. (Maybe not quite as tall as Shiina, but quite surely better looking.)

Mousse finished up his purchase, and the pair left the store. All the while Rie felt flustered about the way Mousse kept looking at her and smiling.
“Is there a restaurant nearby you like?” Mousse asked with a smile.

“Oh, uh... there’s a Korean BBQ place nearby I like? It’s a little expensive though,” Rie offered, looking around to see if there was anywhere cheaper (and a bit less ‘meaty’, just in case this was really a date).

While she didn’t spot any specific restaurants, she did notice three familiar faces trying to dip behind a car as they piled out of the burger joint across the street. Already running at a frazzled state herself, the trio’s faces as the car they tried to hide behind drove away left Rie collapsing into a furious giggling fit.

Mousse was severely confused by her sudden shift in demeanor, and was left looking around in confusion. After a moment he spotted the trio across the street and was able to identify them quickly by Ranma’s fashion sense and Hibari’s red hair.

The trio crossed the street, blushing a little at being caught, and arriving just as Rie got a hold on her giggling fit.

“Hey there, Mousse,” Ranma said with a slightly awkward wave. “What a coincidence, running into you here.”

Mousse was a bit annoyed, but found himself a bit distracted by the opportunity to get a clear view of the bratty trio. Reluctantly, he admitted Ranma was a bit more handsome than he’d given the other lad credit for. Hibari was cuter than he wanted to admit. As for Shui, he found felt his heart fluttering a little still, but the annoyed look in the cursed girl’s eyes just didn’t feel equal to the soft kindness he saw in Rie’s. He’d pretty well given up on Shampoo already, but this sealed the deal.

“Were you too spying on us?” Rie asked, sounding more curious than upset.

Hibari shrugged. “I’m not sure spying is precisely the term I’d used, but, we were curious about you heading off with Mousse.”

“That sounds like spying,” Mousse replied, crossing his arms.

“It’s very soft and innocent. You are a schemer. So we wanted to keep an eye to make sure she would be safe,” Shui replied, crossing her arms as well.

“I was just helping Mousse-san to get some better glasses. His old ones were so terrible,” Rie explained.

“No kidnapping plans?” Shui asked.

“None,” Mousse replied. “I was just going to take Rie out for dinner and a movie to thank her for her help.”

Suddenly Shui and Hibari’s eyes lit up. Shui saw a chance to get Mousse to stop following her so constantly, while Hibari was caught up in the romance.


“I know just the restaurant,” Hibari announced. “They’re usually reservation only, but my dad’s connections mean we can always get in. It’s got the best sukiyaki. Come on! It’s just a couple blocks from here.”

With that, the red haired girl grabbed Rie’s hand and began leading her off. Mousse, feeling
defensive after Hibari had stolen his last crush, grabbed Rie’s free hand as he hurried after.

Shui and Ranma were left watching the others hurry off in a bit of confusion, before Ranma began to laugh.

“She’s such a romantic,” the pigtailed boy said. “Who knows how long it’ll take before she’s satisfied things are runnin’ smoothly. C’mon, I’ll walk ya back to the Neko Hanten before Cologne has a fit about missin’ her two best employees.”

Shui smiled. “Sounds nice.”

The pair were nearly back to the Neko Hanten when spotted a pointy haired teen whose sharp sunglasses felt quite familiar to Ranma.

“Saotome!” Kotatsu blurted before marching over and producing an envelope. “I’ve come to hand you and official challenge!”

Ranma looked down at the envelope and raised an eyebrow. “What for?”

Kotatsu blushed furiously before turning away. “It... it explains in the letter.”

Ranma ripped the envelope open, and began to read the letter.

“Hey, wait! What are you doing reading it right away?” Kotatsu blurted.

“You are very flustered. This is not love letter, is it, Sparta?” Shui asked.

“Seems like it? If I understand this... don’t make much sense though,” Ranma replied, scratching his chin. “I challenge Saotome Ranma (boy mode) to a fight to prove who is more of a man. If Saotome Ranma loses, then Ranma (girl mode) will agree to be my... boyfriend?”

“What’s confusing?” Kotatsu asked. “I said I fell in love with both you and Hibari, even though you’re boys, but... I want to be the more guy one in the relationship.”

“What? Like, even if I were interested in ya, which I ain’t, if I was your boyfriend... we’d both automatically be the guy in the relationship? If I were your girlfriend, then you’d be the guy, but... boyfriends means two guys,” Ranma replied, turning to Shui for support.

Shui just shrugged.

“Obviously you’re the girly one,” Kotatsu shouted.

“I— whatever,” Ranma replied. “Ya wanna fight tomorrow after school? Hibari’d probably want ta run the bettin’ ring, and it’d be nice ta have something useful outta the fight.”

“Sounds good,” Kotatsu said sharply, before turning to Shui. “And, you... stay away from my future boyfriend, buddy.”

“I had a claim first,” Shui replied with a shrug. “You are also no threat to me though. Have fun getting beaten up tomorrow.”

Kotatsu’s mouth scrunched up in rage, before he turned and marched off.

The betting pool was pretty shallow, as no one really knew who Kotatsu was. Still Hibari thought
she’d make some good pocket change unless things went really strange.

The small crowd gathered around the school baseball field, waiting for the fight to start. Kotatsu was already waiting as Ranma strolled out casually, a bored look on his face.

“Are you ready to fight, Saotome?” Kotatsu shouted.

“I dunno,” Ranma sighed, as we sauntered up to the angry young Sparta. Suddenly, once he was within a couple metres of Kotatsu, Ranma slipped into puppy eyes and a cute feminine pose. “A-are you really such a meanie that you’ll hit me?”

While the taunt had it’s intended effect of making Kotatsu flustered, Ranma was quite oblivious to the blushes spreading across the audience as teens with crushes on one version of Ranma felt the strong reminder that there might be two forms for the pigtailed teen, but that Ranma was the same person in either form.

“Ooh, is airen starting to open to acting girly in birth form?” Shui asked from beside Hibari.

“Maybe,” Hibari muttered, before something struck her. “What did you just call him?”

Shui blushed. “Meant tongzhi, honest. Slip of tongue.”

Hibari would have said more, but Kotatsu and Ranma had started to fight.

“Stop making those flirty faces when you look like that!” Kotatsu shouted as he lunged with a jab.

“But you said you wanted a boyfriend. Just a girly one,” Ranma said, batting his eyelashes as he dodged Kotatsu’s strikes.

Getting bored, Ranma turned one dodge into a rounded knee to Kotatsu’s gut, causing the other lad to stumble back a bit. Ranma then pressed the advantage, unleashing a lightning barrage of amaguriken strikes. He had to admit that Kotatsu did a better job of blocking than Ranma expected, but he still managed to get in an uppercut and sent Kotatsu sprawling.

Ranma dropped the feminine posture as he glared down at Kotatsu. “I’m more of a man than you anytime I want to be. You gonna give up now?”

Kotatsu grimaced before wiping some blood from his face. “Alright, so you’re pretty good, but let’s see how you handle the little trick I picked up with my trip to China!”

“Trip to China? Why’d ya go to China?” Ranma asked, more confused than threatened.

“I did my research. The Joketsuzoku are the ones behind all the fancy techniques you and your friends use. So I thought I’d go straight to the source,” Kotatsu replied with a smirk.

Ranma just let out a tired sigh before sliding into a more ready stance. He didn’t know what nonsense he’d be up against now.

Kotatsu hopped to his feet, sliding into an almost sumo like pose with wide spread and deeply bent legs. “Come try me.”

“It’s a defensive technique?” Ranma asked.

“The ultimate defence,” Kotatsu declared. “It’s the famous changchen butouming de fangyou. You could shoot a bullet at me and I could block it in this stance.”
Ranma moved forward, testing with a few probing jabs. Kotatsu blocked perfectly, fancy footwork accompanying the hand movements. A quick attempt at amaguriken proved just futile.

Back off a bit, Ranma had an idea. He walked another metre away or so, before sitting down. “It looks like a really intense stance. How long can ya hold it for?”

“What? You... you’re just going to wait for me to get tired?” Kotatsu said, lips quivering.

“Yeah? I mean, you can’t hurt me, and I can’t hurt you. Not much else available,” Ranma replied.

“Boo! We want a fight!” a member of the crowd shouted.

“No one said I had a time limit,” Ranma shouted back angrily.

Some of the crowd drifted off over the next few minutes (grumbling about a boring fight), though most of them stayed while Ranma and Kotatsu sat in their stalemate. After five or so minutes, Kotatsu’s legs began to visibly wobble, and the spiky haired teen struggled to stay in his stance.

Ranma hopped to his feet and walked over with a grin. “Ya surrenderin’ now?”

“No a chance,” Kotatsu muttered.

Ranma sighed, before looking up at the clouds above. “Ah man, they’re startin’ to get kinda dark. I hope it doesn’t rain.”

The crowd followed Ranma’s eyes up, before almost everyone produced an umbrella.

“Always need to be prepared when Saotome’s fighting,” a boy in the crowd muttered.

“I, uh,” Kotatsu mumbled as he looked up to the sky too. “Maybe we can put this on hold?”

“Why? Afraid to have me beat you up when I’m in girl mode?” Ranma replied.

“No, not that,” Kotatsu said, starting to sound worried as the clouds grew darker.

Ranma’s eye twitched as he figured out what it probably meant. “You managed to get a curse at Jusenkyo, didn’t ya?”

“I-I... uh... all the sign posts were in Chinese, okay? I got a little mixed up,” Kotatsu grumbled.

Ranma grinned and produced a water bottle. “Well, lets see what curse ya got.”

“Woah, hey! P-put that away!” Kotatsu yelped, barely dodging a small splash of water from Ranma. What ensued was a bit of chaos as Ranma chased Kotatsu around, sloshing water the other boy’s way every so often.

“What a dignified display of martial arts,” Hibari said to Shui, giggling to herself.

Kotatsu gave one last dodge as Ranma lobbed a final splash of water Kotatsu’s way.

“Ha! You’re out of water!” Kotatsu declared, laughing confidently.

And then it started to rain.

The younger Sparta suddenly vanished into his clothing. The whole crowd rushed over, arriving just as the cursed boy emerged, now in the form of a small mutt, those angular sunglasses still on his face.
Ranma crouched down and bonked the dog of a boy on the head with a soft chop. “You’ve lost, Sparta. I’d feel guilty about kickin’ a dog, but I might make an exception for you.”

The dog whimpered before turning and fleeing, tail literally between his legs.

Ranma stood up and sighed. “I really hope he doesn’t show up again any time soon. I don’t need more weirdos in love with me.”

Hibari walked over and put a hand on her shoulder. “It’s annoying, but, hey... we can make some money at least.”

She then turned to the crowd. “Speaking of: time for payouts. People who lost first please.”

Hibari’s ensuing negotiations brought a smile back on to Ranma’s face. She was so cute when she got scheming.

Chapter End Notes

Ooh, look. A 2nd ship.
Akane hummed quietly to herself as she worked on her homework. Her Saturday was going nicely, school had been calm (Kuno was sick for once), and now she had the afternoon off.

Then a knocking at the door roused her from her studies. A bit more knocking and she hurried down to check out who it was.

Sliding the door open, she was surprised to find Hibari and Ranma there. Ranma’s face felt like it was mostly taken up by her smile, though Hibari looked a little tired.

“Hey, are the Saturday training sessions back on?” Ranma asked. “We were just in the area, and realised we hadn’t checked about that.”

“Oh, uh... sure,” Akane replied. “Just give me five minutes to get changed into my gi.”

“Don’t rush... on our account,” Hibari said, between breaths. “Ranma’s been... running me all around Nerima for the last... hour. I’d be happy for a breather.”

Akane smiled, before running upstairs and switching to her gi. A couple minutes later she was down in the dojo. She found Ranma stretching while Hibari was drinking a glass of water and talking to Kasumi (who’d presumably brought the water).

“No, no. You didn’t kiss her,” Hibari was saying as Akane came into earshot.

“Oh thank goodness,” Kasumi replied.

Akane raised an eyebrow, but still walked over to where Ranma was.

“So, shall we start, Ran?” Akane asked.

“Sure! I was wonderin’ if you could run me through some ground holds? I, just... I ain’t the best at figurin’ those out on my own still and I’ve been getting rusty,” the short girl said.

“Oh yeah, su—” Akane started, before she remembered the interesting thing about Ran(ma) and began to blush. “Um...”

Nervously, Akane turned to Kasumi, as if her sister could answer her dilemma. Instead, Hibari caught her eye with a raised eyebrow.

“Would you be comfortable practicing holds with me?” Hibari asked.

“Why wouldn’t—oh. Oh right... but, Ran’s still a boy sometimes?” Akane said, glancing back to the short girl again.

“Trust me, Hibari’s the one more likely to ‘accidentally’ put her hand in the wrong place,” Ranma said, getting a stuck out tongue as a reply from the taller redhead.

“Pardon?” Akane asked.

“I can behave myself. It’s just you that I do that with, Ranma,” Hibari replied with a wink.

Ranma blushed furiously. Something about her nervous body language felt so distinctly feminine to Akane, and Akane’s nervousness faded away. Ranma was definitely a girl right now.
“Alright, what move did you want to try?” Akane asked.

Ranma lit up with a smile.

Hibari had noticed Rie shooting her odd looks for most of the past week. Finally, curiosity won out, and so she slipped over to Rie’s shoe locker.

“Yo, Kawai-chan!” Hibari said, sliding up to the other girl.

“Oh, Hi-Hibari?” Rie stammered.

“I’ve noticed you’ve been looking my way lately... have you fallen in love, or is there something you need to tell me?” Hibari asked.

“I... uh... Mousse s-said something that...” the girl stammered.

Hibari’s eyes widened a moment. “Oh.”

Rie nodded nervously.

“About me and Shampoo and, uh, how that all happened?” Hibari asked.

Rie nodded again, prompting a quiet sigh from Hibari.

“Not... not that it matters at all,” Rie blurted. “I mean... with Ranma and Shui and Ukyo and... um, well, it doesn’t matter, does it?”

“You’re a good friend, Rie,” Hibari said. “I... well, yes. There was a reason people are confused, but it’s mostly cleared up.”

“Oh, okay. Um, is there anything I should do?” Rie asked.

“Just keep acting the same?” Hibari replied.

“Oh, yeah. That... that makes sense,” Rie muttered. “Sorry.”

Hibari placed a reassuring hand on Rie’s shoulder. “Don’t overthink things. That’s my advice for life in general.”

With that, Hibari left, giving a wave before vanishing around a corner.

Genma and Ibari were headed into a new cafe that had just opened in the neighbourhood. Ibari made a habit of investigating all new shops in his territory, and Genma looked less ‘yakuza’ than most of Ibari’s employees, so helped with better first impressions.

“I hope the coffee’s half decent,” Ibari muttered. “There’s a severe lack of decent coffee is West Nerima.”

Genma shrugged. He didn’t really care that much for coffee himself. Tea was more his style. (Or saké, if that was an option.)

“Ah, hello, and welcome,” the woman behind the counter said.
She was fairly tall, a long face to match her height, with graceful features, complemented by her black hair tied up into a simple bun. Add to that her dark blue kimono, and she was the picture of traditional beauty.

“Hello,” Genma said simply, before realising Ibani was frantically fixing his hair.

“I should have dressed better today,” Ibani said under his breath before turning to the woman. “He-hello there.”

The Yakuza patriarch walked over in an awkwardly stiff way before sitting down at one of the stools along the counter. Genma followed him, trying not to smirk at how smitten the other man was.

“Did you two know what you wanted, or did you need some time to check the menu?” the woman asked, eyes lingering uncertainly on Ibani a moment.

“Probably a moment to read the menu,” Genma said, lightly elbowing Ibani to remind him not to stare.

“I-Ibari! ... uh... my name is Oozora Ibani,” the mustachioed man blurted.

“Oh, uh, you can call me Fumiko,” the woman replied, smiling gently.

“So, what brings you to our corner of Nerima?” Ibani asked.

“Oh, well... mostly the lower rents? Shinjuku has just been getting so expensive lately,” the woman replied.

Ibani nodded. “I can imagine.”

“I think I’ll try the cinnamon roll and the green tea?” Genma said, having been studying the menu himself.


Nabiki found herself at the Oozora kitchen table with three out of four Oozora sisters, and they all looked very serious.

“Oh, okay, so what exactly is going on?” Nabiki asked.

“It’s dad... he’s acting weird,” Tsubame replied.

“What sort of ‘weird’ are we talking about?”

“We... we’re worried he’s falling for someone,” Tsugumi said, looking a bit guilty to say it.

“And that’s bad?” Nabiki asked.

“It, just... it feels like forgetting about mother a bit,” Tsugumi said, looking a bit guilty to say it.

“Oh... yeah. I understand that completely... So, you want me to spy on him and see where he’s going?” Nabiki asked.

The three girls nodded.
“I’d do it normally, but I’m not sure I could keep quiet the whole time when it’s dad,” Hibari replied.

“Alright. If he goes out today, I’ll see what I can learn,” Nabiki replied.

The sisters gave their thanks when Suzume rushed into the room.

“I managed to talk daddy into taking me to the movies!” the young girl declared.

“I think she forgot she was supposed to just be distracting him,” Hibari whispered to Nabiki.

The fatherin questioned walked in from the same direction as Suzume, chuckling a bit. “I’m glad you’re so happy to have me take you, Suzume. Sometimes I worry your other sis-siblings don’t appreciate their father any more.”

Suzume turned to her father with a deadly serious look in her eyes. “Of course I appreciate you. You’re the easiest to talk into buying me presents when we’re out, so your my favourite to go anywhere with.”

Ibari laughed awkwardly, not quite sure if the girl was serious or not. “You’re growing up into a young mercenary, aren’t you?”

“Merce-what?” Suzume asked.

Nabiki leaned over to Hibari. “Have I mentioned I like her?”

Hibari turned and gave a quick grin. “She’s applied my training well.”

*Following a yakuza boss was a little bit stressful, even for one as calm as Nabiki. Luckily Ibari was quite distracted by Suzume’s various demands and paid no attention to the girl trailing him about half a block back.

When the pair reached the theatre Ibari suddenly became visibly flustered by the woman in front of him in line. With her traditional fashion sense she certainly stood out.

While Nabiki wasn’t able to get in normal listening range, Hibari had bugged Ibari before he left and Nabiki was able to hear his flustered attempts at small talk easily on her headphones. She also kind of wished she couldn’t... he was embarrassingly bad at it.

“Oh, and is this your daughter?” Fumiko asked.

“Ah, yes. Yes. This is Suzume, my youngest,” Ibari replied.

“Hello,” the young girl said. “We’re here to see the Adventures in—”

Nabiki’s feed cut out a bit as a large truck drove past. She decided it was safe to slip a bit closer and get a better connection.

“—heard that’s fun,” Fumiko was replying as Nabiki regained her feed.

“What were you here to see?” Suzume asked.

“Ah, well, I wasn’t completely sure, but I might just join you two,” Fumiko replied.

“That sounds lovely,” Ibari said.
Nabiki hung back as the three bought their tickets. She then scooted in line, scanning the sign to work out which movie they were watching.

“What can I get you miss?” the lad behind the counter asked.

“One for Adventures in Babysitting,” Nabiki said. “And I’d like the receipt.”

(She was going to make sure all her expenses were well documented.)

She then slipped into the back of the theatre, keeping her eyes on Ibari and Fumiko as best she could. Still, it was dark in the theatre, and she was sitting fairly far away. Also, the movie distracted her a bit. Luckily Suzume was sitting between the two of them, so she didn’t have to worry about missing too much.

When the movie ended Nabiki slipped into pursuit mode again. The three wandered along the street, Suzume deciding they’d best get some crepes. Ibari proved quite weak willed in the face of his daughter’s demands, while Fumiko was surprisingly supportive of the girl’s schemes. Clearly someone wanted to play ‘good cop’.

After lunch they left to do some shopping, Ibari proving himself more and more useless against the pressure a woman he was infatuated with and his youngest daughter. (Nabiki rolled her eyes a bit at the way youngest children could always get their way. At least Suzume seemed to appreciate the power it gave her, unlike Akane.)

Nabiki had slipped back into the Oozora home a few minutes after Ibari and Suzume had returned. Nabiki made her way up to Hibari’s room, avoiding the commotion downstairs.

She expected Hibari to be downstairs, with all the commotion about Suzume’s movie watching trip ending up a five hour affair, but decided to air on the side of caution.

“What is it?” Hibari’s voice called out, sounding a bit suspicious.

“Nabiki,” the spy for the day replied.

“Oh... I guess you can come in.”

Nabiki opened the door, and was (for a brief moment) flustered by what she saw. Ranma was seated on the bed, while Hibari was on his lap with her legs around his midsection and hands held behind his neck.

“Am I interrupting something?” Nabiki asked.

“I-I swear, I just... I just came here to ask for some help with math homework,” Ranma replied, face as red as his unbuttoned silk shirt.

“And someone decided chemistry was more fun?” Nabiki asked with a smirk.

“Of course!” Hibari replied, grinning away. “I’m glad someone gets it.”

“So, uh... what did you have to tell us?” Ranma asked, eyes glancing nervously between the two girls.

“Uncle Ibari’s definitely got a crush,” Nabiki said, strutting casually over to sit down at the desk chair. “She’s got a very traditional vibe. Runs that new coffee shop over near Shakuji park. Named
“Oh greeaat, the traditional type,” Hibari groaned, leaning into a tighter hug against Ranma (who responded by somehow turning redder).

“Planning some sabotage?” Nabiki asked.

“I’ll give it a week,” Hibari replied, still leaned against Ranma’s chest. “It might fizzle out by then.”

It did not seem likely to fizzle out by then.

Suzume had proven very fond of Fumiko, and had gotten permission from Ibari to go on another shopping trip with the woman twice in the week. The other three sisters had insisted Ibari bring her home after the Thursday meet up, and were now waiting for her arrival (Ranma nervously joining them and munching on some chips).

“It’s almost Suzume’s bedtime,” Tsugumi mentioned as she glanced at the clock.

“Hey, if I’ve taught her anything it’s to be a rebel,” Hibari replied. “If she thinks she can get away with staying out past her bedtime she will.”

That got a glare from Tsubame.

“You’re a terrible influence,” the brunette muttered.

Hibari grinned massively. “Of course.”

Further arguing was interrupted by the sound of the front door opening. The three girls scrambled towards the door, while Ranma followed at a much calmer pace.

When they arrived, Fumiko was visibly overwhelmed by the four sets of eyes studying her.

“Oh, hello there. Are you all Suzume’s siblings?” the woman asked.

“Mostly,” Suzume announced. “Ranma isn’t. But he will be, once he marries Hibari.”

“Really? They seem rather young though,” Fumiko said.

“Heh, well, there’s no rush,” Ibari explained, sweating a bit nervously.

“Ah. Well, you have very cute daughters, Oozora-san,” Fumiko said.

“Haha, yes. They’re all... all,” Ibari stammered, his eyes lingering on Hibari for a moment. “Uh... yes. cute girls. Yes.”

Fumiko raised an eyebrow, seeming to have noticed Ibari’s reluctance, and turned to Hibari herself. The red haired girl felt like the woman was seeing her in a way no one else managed. Nervously, she reached back and grabbed Ranma’s hand, unsure what this very traditionally dressed woman was going to do next.

Ranma was a bit confused, but held Hibari’s hand firmly and stepped a bit closer. That got a silent ‘oh’ out of Fumiko. Hibari narrowed her eyes feeling ready to challenge this strange woman who was intruding into her home.
“Auntie Fumiko’s very nice. There’s no reason to glare at her, Hibari,” Suzume said, stepping in front of the woman defensively.

“It’s okay, Suzume-chan,” Fumiko said. “I should probably get heading back to my home anyway.”

Suzume turned to her, eyes large and sad. “I wish you could stay here. Daddy likes you after all.”

Pretty well everyone in the room blushed at her boldness.

“I, uh... well, S-Suzume, whether that’s true or not... it would,” Ibari stammered aimlessly.

“That’s something that takes time,” Fumiko added. “If it were to ever happen.”

“How much time are we talking about?” Suzume asked.

“Suzume,” Tsugumi half hissed, before turning to Fumiko. “I’m very sorry about her. She’s always been outspoken, but... this is rather severe, even for her.”

Suzume pouted quietly as Fumiko gave a nervous goodbye. Once the woman was gone, the older three sisters turned to their father, glaring at him.

“So, is Suzume right? Are you thinking about a serious relationship?” Tsubame asked.

“Er, well... maybe? She’s very nice, and quite pretty,” Ibari answered.

“What about mom?” Tsugumi asked. “You’re just forgetting about her now?”

“I... well... it’s been nine years? Maybe that’s time to think about love again?” Ibari offered.

That got him glares from the three girls again.

“I can’t believe it,” Tsubame muttered.

“Mhm. Just forgetting the love of your life because a few years have gone by,” Hibari muttered.

“I want a proper mom,” Suzume grumbled. “You all talk about mom all the time, but I don’t remember her at all. Why can’t I have someone I can call mom? Fumiko’s nice and I like her. It’s not fair.”

The three older sisters felt a wave of guilt rush over them, none quite sure how to respond.

“I think we’re all rushing too far ahead. I only met her a week ago. Discussing marriage options already seems a bit extreme,” Ibari said, regaining his composure.

Ranma shrugged. “I dunno, people talk about marriage pretty well immediately in my experience.”

“You’re not exactly a normal example, Ranma,” Hibari said softly, before turning to her dad. “Fine. For Suzume’s benefit, we’ll call a truce.”

“Thank you,” Ibari replied.

Ranma was sorting through her clothing, trying to figure out what to wear for the day. It was starting to get a bit chilly for skirts, even if she had good cold tolerance. Maybe it was time she looked into leggings (she did not envy girls at schools with all year skirt uniforms).
“Hey, Ran—oooh,” Hibari said, having apparently gotten a little distracted by Ranma’s attire of only a pair of boxers.

“You know you can knock, right?” Ranma asked, sticking her tongue playfully.

“Where’s the fun in that?” Hibari asked, skipping over to sit down on Ranma’s chair.

“So, what brings you over to my room today?” Ranma asked as she put one of her lacier bras on (she was certain Hibari liked the view, and didn’t mind giving her fiancee some eye candy).

“How do you feel about skipping some classes this morning?” Hibari asked.

“I’m doing alright in class now, so... sure? Why though?” Ranma replied.

“That Fumiko woman... I think she picked up on dad’s reluctance to call me a daughter. I want to find out just what she thinks, before I stick to the truce I offered,” Hibari explained. “She seems pretty old fashioned. Not a good sign.”

“Ah. Sure thing,” Ranma said. “And, uh, can I get some fashion advice? Trying to figure out what’s cuter.”

“I mean, it’s you. Whatever you wear will be cute,” Hibari said, slipping over and hugging the shorter girl. “Nothing at all would be pretty nice too.”

“N-not really an option,” Ranma blurted, blushing furiously.

Ranma and Hibari strolled into the small coffee shop, glad to see that they’d avoid the morning rush (assuming there was one at such a new shop). The pair found Fumiko cleaning the counter, and Hibari did her best not to glare when the woman looked up.

“Oh, hello... Hibari was it?” Fumiko asked.

“Hello. And yes, that’s my name,” Hibari replied as she sat down. “So...”

“So?” Fumiko asked, glancing over at Ranma a moment.

“What are you plans with my dad?” Hibari asked.

“I... I wasn’t planning anything too serious,” Fumiko replied, sadness in her voice. “I shouldn’t have gotten as close as I did, but... I just got caught up in playing ‘mom’ around your little sister.”

“R-really? I... aren’t you pretty firmly around marriage age?” Hibari asked, trying to understand this woman’s motives.

Fumiko smiled softly. “Marriage isn’t really an option... I do wish you and your boyfriend the best of luck. Maybe the laws will change in the future after all.”

“What laws?” Ranma asked.

“I... uh,” Fumiko leaned in towards Hibari. “Does she know about... well, you?”

“What about me?” Hibari asked, eyeing the confusing woman suspiciously.

“Well, that you’re... that you’re like me?” Fumiko asked.
“Like you? Like you how?” Hibari asked, feeling a bit confused at the turn this conversation was taking.

Fumiko stepped back and paled a bit. “Oh no... maybe I was wrong. It’s just... the way your father acted. I thought...”

“Wait, you mean you’re... you also have that, uh, little hormonal issue?” Hibari asked.

“I’d call it a bit more than ‘little’, but yes. So, in the eyes of the law, I could never marry ‘another’ man,” Fumiko said, her voice soft and distant. “I really hope the law changes when you’re older.”

Hibari felt tears filling up in her eyes as she stood up and grabbed Fumiko’s hands. “I have something to show you. Do you have a kettle handy?”

Fumiko blinked, confused. “I run a cafe. I have several kettles handy. Or just a water heater if you need hot water now?”

“Ooh that would work,” Hibari replied. “Doesn’t take too much. Maybe a glass of water?”

Fumiko hurried over pouring out a mug of hot water, and returned, still utterly perplexed.

“C’mon, Ranma, you’ve got to show her,” Hibari said, practically vibrating with excitement.

Ranma blushed. “I... but I’m dress really girly right now?”

Hibari glared a little.

“What’s going to happen?” Fumiko asked.

“You have to see it to believe it. Come on, Ranma,” Hibari said.

“Okay,” Ranma mumbled, grabbing the mug.

“Wait, wasn’t you boyfriend named—” Fumiko began to see when Ranma poured the hot water onto her head.

The sudden transformation to a handsome (if soft featured) boy by the petite girl left Fumiko speechless.

“I can get you a bit of that magic,” Hibari said. “Uh... right, I should mention that this is Ranma’s birth form. The girl mode is cursed form.”

“Th-that... she... now he... and...” Fumiko stammered, before processing what Hibari said. “Wait, you can get that?”

“It’s a weaker version, but... yeah,” Hibari replied with a grin. “I’m using some right now.”

“With her you only know by hair colour,” Ranma said, still feeling a bit nervous someone might see him. “C-could I get some cold water? My, uh, this bra doesn’t fit very well when I’m a guy.”

“Oh! Yes, sure!” Fumiko replied, rushing of and returning with a glass a few seconds later.

Ranma smiled and quickly turned back female. “Thanks a ton.”

“Come on, Ranma. We’ve got to go get her some of my Nyannichuan powder,” Hibari said, grinning from ear to ear as she grabbed Ranma’s hand.
“I guess we’ll be a few minutes,” Ranma said, getting pulled along by a downright hyper Hibari.

Fumiko could only nod, at a loss for words.

Ranma was barely able to keep up with Hibari on the trip to and from the Oozora home. She’d rarely seen the taller girl this excited, and had to admit that it was incredibly cute.

They arrived back at Fumiko’s cafe in record time, packets of instant Jusenkyo in hand.

The cafe was quite quiet when they returned, though there was an old man nursing a coffee and a bagel in the corner.

“Should we go upstairs?” Hibari whispered to Fumiko, after crossing the floor to the counter.

“It would be more private, but... someone should watch the front,” Fumiko replied.

“I’ve got waitressing experience,” Ranma replied. “I can handle pretty well anythin’ but coffee. I’ll just tell people it’s a few minutes for that.”

Fumiko smiled. “Thank you.”

Hibari followed the woman up stairs and into her small apartment. The teen explained how to prepare the powder as she did so, before handing it over to Fumiko. The woman had removed her kimono and was standing there in just a padded bra and some shorts both to keep the kimono dry and better see the impact of the Jusenkyo magic. Taking a deep breath, she dumped the water on her head.

Fumiko shrank a few centimetres, her black hair gaining a slight purple undertone. The more noticeable change was in her chest however, which was now being quite compressed.

“Oh man, I’m jealous,” Hibari said.

“This... this really is magical,” Fumiko said softly.

“I know, right? It’s the best,” Hibari replied.

“I... I’m really going to have to go bra shopping though. This definitely isn’t comfortable,” Fumiko muttered. “I’m going to have to figure out something else for today...”

The woman looked up at Hibari and a moment of silence lingered.

“Um... I could probably use some privacy while changing.”

“Oh! Right, yes,” Hibari replied. “I’ll be downstairs.”

Hibari hurried down the stairs, hopping the last four or so, when she found a very flustered birth form Ranma hidden behind the counter, the black haired teen’s front soaked.

“What happened?” Hibari asked.

“That coffee machine is evil,” Ranma explained. “I swear I didn’t touch any nobs or anything, but it drenched me and I changed.”

“Oh... there is a lot of hot water down here, isn’t there?” Hibari said, studying a kettle from a safe
“So much,” Ranma muttered grumpily.

“I guess we should warn Fumiko about all that,” Hibari said, moving over to poke the espresso machine. “I wonder how this thing works anyway.”

“Could you get me some cold water?” Ranma asked.

“Oh, right,” Hibari said, heading to the sink and returning with a glass for Ranma.

“Thanks,” Ranma said, once she’d returned to female form.

A few moments later, Fumiko appeared from the stairs, smiling with her eyes a little glazed over. She honestly looked as if she were walking on a cloud, and both teens had to check to make sure her feet were actually touching the ground.

“I realised I forgot to warn you about a little issue with Jusenkyo,” Hibari said, feeling guilty to say anything negative to such a happy woman. “You see... bad luck kind of follows having a curse. Specifically bad luck involving water that will change your from, and, uh... you’ve got a lot of hot water around here.”

“Oh... that’s unfortunate. Is there any protection available?” Fumiko asked, seeming to come back to earth with the news.

“Uhh... I never actually asked,” Hibari muttered.

“We should totally ask about that,” Ranma said, just as amazed to have never wondered. “I mean, the cat’s tongue doesn’t really protect ya. It just makes changin’ hurt.”

“Cat’s tongue?” Fumiko asked.

“It’s a thing that makes you sensitive to hot water,” Hibari explained. “You know, I just realised something: I came here to check if Fumiko was good enough for my family, but now I’m doubting my dad’s good enough for her.”

“Oh?” Fumiko asked.

“Well, he’s not the best with my whole situation,” Hibari replied. “Or Ranma’s. So... might be best for you to just avoid the whole situation. Even if Suzume does like you.”

“Hmm... well... maybe we just need to join forces to bring him to his senses? From what I’ve seen, all four of you girls are pretty good kids. He must be doing something right,” Fumiko offered.

“Three out of four, maybe,” Hibari muttered. “Tsubame keeps stealing my scrunchies. Amongst other, worse, things...”

“Well, that means two projects. But I think I’m up for the challenge,” Fumiko said, giving the pair a confident smirk as she flexed a bit. “Oh... I’ve got a bit less muscle there now. Some of the heavy lifting is going to be trickier.”

“I could help ya out,” Ranma said. “I’ve got good muscles, girl or guy.”

Fumiko smiled. “I could use a bit of help around here. Would you two be free to work a bit after school?”
The two girls turned to one another before nodding.

“Yeah,” Ranma said.

“We’ve been waitresses before. We just need to learn how this coffee stuff works,” Hibari replied.

Fumiko nodded. “Were you planning to go to school today, or do you have time for some lessons this morning?”

“Eh, we can handle a couple missed days,” Hibari replied.

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